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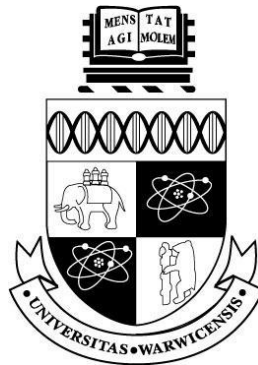
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Shakespeare in Thailand

by

Paradee Tungtang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Theatre Studies and Translation
Studies



School of Theatre, Performance and Cultural Policy
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Paradee Tungtang

February 2011.

DECLARATION

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of the university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgment has been made in the text”

Paradee Tungtang

February 2011

ABSTRACT

TITLE Shakespeare in Thailand

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Unlike most Asian nations to which Shakespeare was imported with the colonizers during the mid-1800s to impose Western literary culture on the colonized, in the case of Thailand, it is the other way round. Thailand (or Siam as it was called then) managed to escape colonization by Western powers, but during this politically unstable period, Siam felt the urgent need to westernize the country. A period of intensive westernization thus began. Shakespeare arrived as one of several significant elements of the nation's self-westernization in literary education. In 1916, the name of Shakespeare became widely known in Siam as one of his plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, was translated by King Vajiravudh (1881-1925), who is highly regarded as a prolific dramatist and all-around man of letters in the country. The King himself initiated Western literary translation by translating three plays by Shakespeare, namely *The Merchant of Venice* (1916), *As You Like It* (1921), and *Romeo and Juliet* (1922), and also by adapting Shakespeare's *Othello* (1925) into a Siamese conventional dance drama playtext. Although there were some other attempts before and after the King to translate Shakespeare, none of them has been successful in leaving a memorable impact in Thai literary circles as much as the King's version. Translating and staging Shakespeare's works in Thailand became rare, practised only within a small circle of literary scholars. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, there have been a handful of attempts to translate and stage Shakespearean plays by commercial Thai theatre practitioners. To stage Shakespeare's plays in Thailand especially in a contemporary context, most production teams have encountered a

similar difficulty, that of bridging the gap to bring Shakespeare to Thai popular audiences who embrace different backgrounds in dramatic practice and aesthetics.

The main purposes of this study are, therefore, to examine how Shakespeare has been translated, staged, and received by Thai readers and audiences from the late nineteenth century when Shakespeare was introduced in Siam until today, and to locate his influences and impact on Thai literary and theatrical culture. This study is designed to shed light on the history of Thai translations of Shakespeare and also to provide an analysis of the translation strategies adopted by early Thai translators to domesticate Shakespeare into the Thai context. So the thesis examines the process of text appropriation and domestication adopted by Thai translators and theatre practitioners to make Shakespeare accessible to Thai readers and popular audiences. The use of Shakespeare's plots and allusions to Shakespeare's plays in contemporary Thai television soap operas is also another main focus of the study. This study also suggests that the domestication process applied to Shakespeare both in translation and in staging is influenced by the changes in the social, political and aesthetic contexts of each different period; furthermore, the process of domestication obviously becomes less problematic the further the country moves towards westernization.

Preface

*We can perhaps more usefully think of Shakespeare
as a kind of engine of cultural appropriation.*

Anthony B. Dawson

‘For God’s sake, we go to a [Buddhist] temple not a church, how on earth is it possible that we will understand Shakespeare? [My translation],’¹ Such an astute comment made by Pichet Klunchun, one of the most renowned contemporary Thai stage performers, who is both a well-trained traditional Thai dance dramatist and an independent dance company director, is hardly to be ignored. This is particularly the case when such a comment comes from one among a very few Thai performers who has extensive experience of performing in many intercultural theatre projects, including some Asian Shakespeare productions, outside his native country.² Despite his performing background playing major roles in some adaptations of Shakespeare’s work, Pichet³ expresses his disappointment regarding the fact that most stage productions in Thailand, mainly for marketing reasons, are likely to opt for staging ‘big-name’ western

¹ Santi Taepanit, ‘Interview with Pichet Klunchun’, *Tua Ku Khong Ku [Me and Myself]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Hui Lae Hui Press, 2009), p. 23.

² Pichet Klunchun performed the role of Gertrude in Ong Keng Sen’s intercultural Shakespeare’s adaptation, ‘*Search: Hamlet*’ in Denmark from August to September in 2002 and performed a leading role in the contemporary dance adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, deconstructed by internationally-renowned choreographers Marcia Haydee and Ismael Ivo, in Bangkok, Thailand, 13-14 January 2004.

³ In Thai culture, it is common to address people by their first name not the last name as in Western culture. Thus, in this thesis, the Thai form of addressing (first name) is often applied, especially when all the names in a reference are Thai.

plays, including Shakespeare's, rather than newly-creating their own innovative productions. He also suggests that Thai audiences are somehow 'fooled' by the so-called 'international culture', which is actually a part of a global marketing strategy, into believing that Shakespeare is the world's greatest dramatist whose works they must see at least once in their lifetime. 'But do we understand him? No, because every aspect of our [dramatic culture] is different from those of Shakespeare's' [My translation].⁴

According to Pichet's viewpoint, Shakespeare in Thailand is like a signpost for being civilised and intellectualised according to Western standards. Some Thai audiences may want to see Shakespearean productions in order to acquire a sense of being 'high-class', exhibiting their ostensibly refined dramatic tastes, without any profound understanding of Shakespeare's dramatic philosophy or of his artistic expressions. Although productions of Shakespeare's work, both traditional stagings and innovatively experimental projects, occur in vast numbers around the globe, his work is only staged sporadically in Thailand. His name, which is usually regarded globally as a strong selling-point, hardly has the same effect in this country. On the other hand, Shakespeare's reputation and his iconic literary image may cause some Thai audiences to shy away from the theatre. In a recent stage production of a Thai Shakespearean adaptation of *Hamlet: the Techno Drama* (2009), the director Damkerng Thitapiyasak admits that in terms of public relations and marketing plans, Shakespeare's name is not the selling point when compared to the famous name of his leading actor.⁵ This is probably the main

⁴ Taepanit, p. 23.

⁵ Interview with Damkerng Thitapiyasak, the director of *Hamlet: the Techno Drama* (2009), on 14 March 2009.

reason why in the promotional posters, apart from the play's title in the biggest characters, the names of the actor, the director, and the theatre company are shown in big letters, while the name of 'the world's greatest playwright' disappears completely.

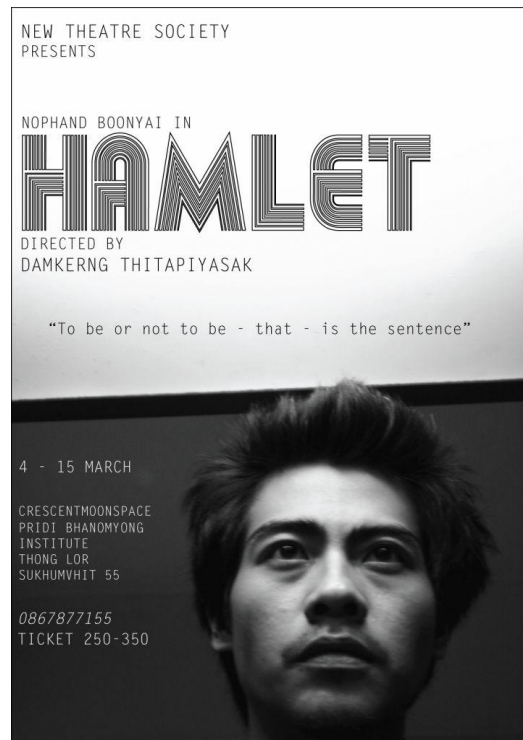


Figure 1 – Poster of *Hamlet: the Techno Drama* (2009), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* performed solo by Nophand Boonyai

Shakespeare's plays, especially when adapted and staged in the Thai language, are commonly rendered in archaic words and sometimes in very strict Thai traditional poetic forms, in order to maintain a sense of the 'Shakespearean rhetorical style'. There are no records of productions in Thailand that have staged the whole of any of Shakespeare's original plays without massive scene deletions

and lines being cut or condensed; for when Shakespeare's plays are rendered in Thai poetic forms, they could become double the length of the original scripts. Most Thai translators have attempted to keep the essence of Shakespeare's original linguistic style by imitating or even inventing appropriate archaic language. Use of poetic words based on the Pali and Sanskrit languages is a common practice. Translating 'the world's greatest poet' thus becomes an activity confined within a very small circle of Thai scholars whose excellent knowledge of the English language seems insufficient to claim creditability in translating Shakespeare. They are required, indeed expected, to have demonstrated their rhetorical aptitude; in other words, they are asked to prove themselves to be poets in order to be able to translate Shakespeare. Furthermore, faithfully translating the texts written by world-wide famous writers is the way in which Thai translators can show respect for the source texts. Wit Siwasariyanon, a Thai literary scholar and translation critic, points out that the reputation of the writers of the source text is a crucial factor in deciding how the texts will be treated in the translated version. If the source texts are merely general texts written by a common writer, the translators might feel that they are given some space to exercise their artistic license by arranging, deleting, or editing the text the way they think it is appropriate in the target language. On the other hand, if the texts are written by world-wide famous writers (such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy and Rabindranath Tagore), editing the texts is regarded as showing no respect to the great writers; such practice is unacceptable in the Thai literary circle.⁶

⁶ Quoted in Natthawan Anusasanan, 'Translation techniques in *Romeo and Juliet* translated by H.M. King Rama VI', Thai Texts (unpublished MA thesis, Research Institute of Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, 2001), p. 20.

Shakespeare, therefore, is hard not only when he is read in his original old English language, but he is equally hard to understand in most Thai translated versions. Pawit Mahasarinand, the director of a recent Thai Shakespeare production of *Payu Pirote* [*The Tempest*] in 2007, recalled that one of his audience said that seeing his Shakespeare production, even though it was in the Thai language, gave the exact same impression as seeing a foreign film so that: ‘subtitles would be preferable’.⁷ However, some modern Thai dramatists agree that Shakespeare should not be too easy to understand as it is a good thing to let the audiences strain a little to understand the words of the great poet. If to get to the essence of Shakespeare’s plays means that the audiences have to struggle ‘a little’ with his words, then one might also query whether Shakespeare without his language is still Shakespeare, when many sources seem to suggest that the real dramatic essence of Shakespeare’s plays lies solely in the richness of his language. What do we say about those productions of Shakespeare presented in the forms of silent films and ballets in the West or dance drama in some Asian countries?⁸ How is it possible for Shakespeare to fit into the dramatic culture – the Thai dramatic tradition, in particular – in which words are regarded as less significant than visual elements?

Like other Asian countries, Thailand (formerly known as Siam before the political revolution in 1932) has its own rich dramatic culture in which theatre performance has been created and shaped within the frame of social and religious

⁷ Interview with Pawit Mahasarinand, the director of *Payu Pirote* (translated from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*), on 25 January 2007.

⁸ See more in Kevin J. Wetmore, ‘*Samritechak* and Intercultural Shakespeare in Cambodia’, *Shakespeare in Hollywood, Asia, and Cyberspace*, ed. by Alexander C.Y. Huang and Charles S. Ross (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2009), pp. 166-71.

norms. The indigenous form of Siamese drama is developed from the dance drama tradition which James R. Brandon calls 'total theatre' in the sense that all performance aspects are fused into a single form.⁹ The perfect balance among its dramatic components is the essence of its dramatic style. Apart from that, Siamese theatre serves mainly to entertain its 'viewers' visually rather than orally. Visual impression is the core of artistic creation which Siamese drama aims to achieve. Moreover, staged performances are more likely to be seen as part of a festive occasion. Siamese people are not regular theatre-goers as in the Western sense. Before the advent of commercial theatre in the late-nineteenth century, stage performing was occasional, and to be an artist was not regarded as a serious occupation. As is usual for celebrations and festive events, theatre performance is deemed to have no responsibility to serve as a means for community education, nor do native audiences go to theatre seeking for intellectual enlightenment. Performance is purely to entertain and may, by chance, demonstrate some social and moral norms which conform to Buddhist doctrines. In order to fit Shakespearean theatre and Western dramatic philosophy into this Thai dramatic scenario, a wide gap has to be filled and extensive adaptation has to be undertaken.

As in many other countries in Asia, Western entrepreneurs and colonial administrations brought popular forms of Western arts, including literature and theatre, into Siam. However, unlike most other Asian nations, Siam has never become a Western colony. The country managed to get through the peak

⁹ James R. Brandon, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 7.

politically-threatening period of colonization and maintain its national sovereignty. Nevertheless, the impact of colonization could not possibly be avoided for a defenceless nation. Siam had to westernize itself in order to show to the Western powers that the country was on its way to civilization according to Western standards. Studies of Western literature and translations of Western classics were then naturally embraced as a part of this self-westernization plan. Due to the fact that Siam was not an official Western colony, the freedom to select what did and what did not fit into its indigenous culture through educational reformation was wider than that of formal Western colonies. As the main objective was to give the impression of Western civilization, the study of Western culture was not taken seriously nor was it deep. Western culture, including Western languages, literature and drama, became an exotic sign of modern fashion and the symbol of good taste, while at a deeper level, the essence of ‘Thainess’ and Siamese aesthetics were still the core of most cultural practices.

Shakespeare was first introduced in Siam around a century ago by the most important figure of the nation at that time, King Vajiravudh of Siam (1881-1925).¹⁰ After many years of education in England, King Vajiravudh had developed his ardent passion for Western literature and its arts of theatre. When he returned to Siam, along with his state duty as the leader of the nation, the King demonstrated his artistic interests as an enthusiastic literary translator and dramatist. Translating three of Shakespeare’s plays, adapting one play of Shakespeare into a Siamese traditional dance drama playscript and being inspired

¹⁰ Due to the fact that many Westerners may hear about Siam and see the image of the country coloured by a world-wide famous Broadway musical *The King and I*, it may be helpful to note that King Vajiravudh was the grandson of King Mongkut, the main character in *The King and I*.

by some of Shakespeare's plots and rhetorical style to develop his own dramatic creations, the dramatic works of the King, especially his translations of Shakespeare, are regarded as some of the best examples of translation practice. His translations set a high standard for later-generation translators who may want to try their hand translating Shakespeare. The King's works are famous and widely read so that, to some extent, the King's name overshadows that of the original playwright; his translated works ostensibly become 'original' in their own right and are studied nowadays as classic pieces of Thai literature. That Shakespeare has become the most popular and best-known name among other Western writers in Thailand today owes much to the fact that his name was closely associated with the King as one of the King's favourite writers.

The image of the old Siam, particularly during the period of the advent of pre-westernization in the mid-nineteenth century, was introduced world-wide and perceptions of its life were coloured by the huge success of Rogers and Hammerstein's Broadway musical, *The King and I*, in 1951. Inspired by the memoirs of Anna Leonowens, an English teacher who taught English in King Mongkut's court in the 1860s, the musical (later produced in a film version in 1956 and in a remade, non-musical version called *Anna and the King* in 1999) has had a huge impact on Siam and the Siamese image in Western perspectives. For Western audiences, Siam was portrayed as a land full of wonders, enchantment and peculiarities. With an exotic, oriental beauty presented through its people, costumes, a golden palace, and a huge Buddha image in *The King and I*, Western audiences have formed some fixed attitudes about this small country in the Far East from their impression of the musical. In spite of the fact that the musical and

the films¹¹ are renowned worldwide, the Thai government banned these shows and every version of its cinematic incarnation.¹² Thai authorities had complained that *The King and I* and the film versions have several scenes that distort Siamese history and insult the King (King Mongkut of Siam) by presenting the Siamese monarch and the King as a buffoon and denigrating Thai culture as inferior to Western. Thus, the film(s) were declared illegal under a 1930 law of ‘lese majeste’ prohibiting filmmakers from portraying the Thai monarchy in a disrespectful way.¹³ In Western perspectives, the action of the Thai government may seem to be ‘a somewhat ludicrous overreaction’,¹⁴ for such an issue as film-making but, on a deeper level, the banning was an act to prevent the spread of some sensitive political confusions and offences regarding the highest institution and the symbolic head of the country – the Thai monarchy.

The production of *The King and I*, for Western theatre practitioners, was perhaps created without a malicious political intention. In fact, it was common practice for dramatists in every dramatic culture to find new sources of exotic ingredients to spice up their theatre productions. A taste of exotic culture seen through unusual costumes and make-ups, bizarre actions and gestures of the actors (who were, of course, non-natives of the original culture being portrayed), and

¹¹ Including the 1956 Yul Brynner movie, the 1999 animated feature, and the 1999 remade version starring Jody Foster as Anna Leonowens.

¹² Noy Thrupkaew, ‘The King and Thai: A Contested History Gets the Royal Treatment’, *The American Prospect*, Vol. 8, Issue 14, September 2003 <[http://www. questia.com](http://www.questia.com)> [accessed January 2007], para. 3 of 10.

¹³ Carol Divjak and Peter Symonds, ‘Why are the Thai authorities so sensitive about *Anna and the King?*’, World Socialist Website, <<http://www1.wsws.org/articles/2000/apr2000/thai-a03.shtml>> [accessed 5 February 2011] para. 3-9 of 26.

¹⁴ Divjak and Symonds, para. 10 of 26.

glamorous scenes and settings have been sought after by Western dramatists for a long period of time. *Madame Butterfly*, *The King and I*, and *Miss Saigon* are a few examples of these ‘exotic’ oriental tastes in Western theatre productions. All of them portray the picture of the East through Westerners’ eyes. In Siamese theatre, this practice was also common, starting from adapting folk-tales from neighboring countries in the region into traditional Siamese dance drama and developing into adapting Western plays and their theatrical style to shape modern Thai drama today. However, this theatrical practice, when presented without careful thought and consideration, can somehow result in a misunderstanding between two cultures; it may widen the gap and draw the distinctive line between the ‘us’ and the ‘other’. The image of Siam seen through the perspective of the non-native Western producers may not be completely accurate, especially when it is seen through the eyes of native audiences. *The King and I* was hugely successful and entertaining to watch by Western audiences as it depicted the story of a Western teacher and her civilizing influence on a savage king.¹⁵ But for Thai audiences, it was difficult to embrace the distorted image of the highly-respected King Mongkut (who, in reality, spent 27 years as a devoted Buddhist monk and was nearing 60 when Anna worked for him) sharing a secret love interest with and being politically advised by an English woman.¹⁶

Similarly, when it comes to staging Shakespeare’s plays by Thai dramatists, the process of selecting some ‘exotic’ Western materials which were appropriate and conformed to Thai cultural aspects was completely dependent on

¹⁵ Thrupkaew, para. 4 of 10.

¹⁶ Ibid., para. 5 of 10.

Thai perspectives. Shakespeare as Thai audiences see him is, of course, different from Shakespeare as seen from Western audiences' perspectives. Thai people always find their own way to adapt all kinds of foreign influences making them more Thai. Philip Cornwel-Smith marks his observation in *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* saying that, 'Thai things have less to do with things than with an attitude towards them: an aesthetic, a palette, a line, all conveyed with a blend of serenity and fun. Anything given time enough to steep here can end up very Thai.'¹⁷ Translating and staging Shakespeare are of course no exception. Staging Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in the traditional Thai dramatic style is a good example. The role of Shylock in particular, when performed by a Thai actor trained in the dance drama tradition, becomes something very different from the original script. The Thai interpretation of the role of Shylock originated when the play was performed in the early twentieth century by court dance dramatists. There is a story that circulated within a circle of traditional dance dramatists that the role of the Thai Shylock was firstly performed by a local dance drama master who based the character of Shylock on the famous character of Jujaka, a greedy old Brahmin beggar from *Vessantara Jataka* – the story of Buddha's past life (which is very well-known to most Buddhist Thai audiences). Shakespeare's Shylock who was a rich but mean Jewish moneylender, therefore became a guileful, ill-mannered and disgusting villain. When performed by a student from the Thai Dance Academy School Theatre Troupe in 1990, the Thai Shylock somehow still showed his unmannerly behaviour by getting into the habit of

¹⁷ Philip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* (Bangkok: Sirivatana Printing Co. Ltd., 2005), p. 11.

scratching his body (his bottom, his neck, his head, etc.) while conversing with other characters, to give an impression to the audiences that he was a discourteous, filthy old man.

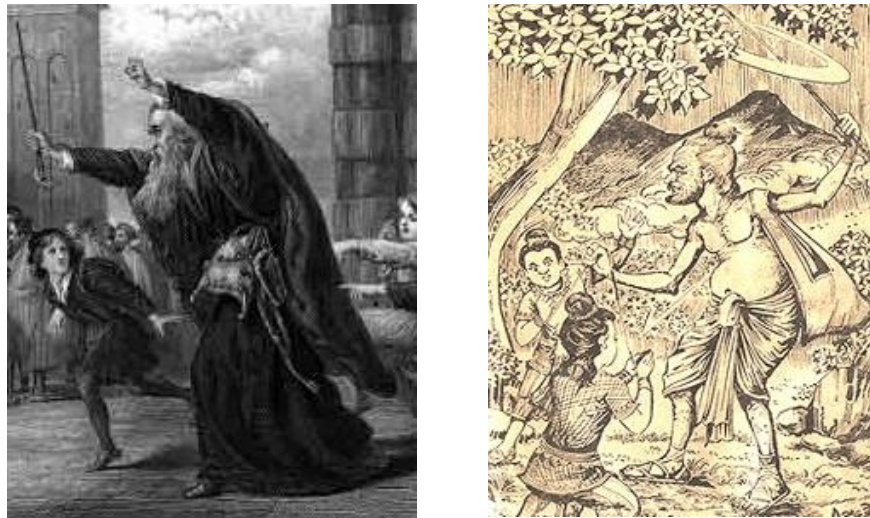


Figure 2 – Shylock from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and Jujaka

Brahmin from *Vessantara Jataka*

Study of Shakespeare in Thailand is still mainly limited to students who study English language and English literature as their majors. Translations of Shakespeare’s plays, particularly the versions translated by King Vajiravudh, are more commonly known as some of them are studied in Thai literature courses in compulsory education. The study of Shakespeare, including translating and staging Shakespeare in Thai, is apparently slight, especially from the perspective of Thai literary and dramatic studies. The main purpose of this study, therefore, is to give historical background and contextual understanding to the translating and staging of Shakespeare in Thailand. It also highlights some questions and issues related to literary translating and staging practices, all of which inspire this research study to ask the questions: ‘Why did Thai scholars translate Shakespeare

in the first place?'; 'What sort of domestication (sometimes replaced by the terms *transformation*, *adaptation*, *recreation*) strategies have been adopted by the translators to make Shakespeare's plays less foreign in their translations?'; 'What is the most appropriate relation of 'Shakespeare' to indigenous performance traditions?'; 'What impact has Shakespearean drama had on Thai literary and theatrical cultures?'; 'What are the response and reception of Thai readers and audiences to Shakespearean dramatic style?' The thesis aims to examine how Shakespeare's work has been translated, produced, and received in Thailand both as literary texts and dramatic performances since the pioneering attempt in the 1900s to the present day, and also to provide an analysis of the translation strategies adopted by early Thai translators in the process of domesticating Shakespeare into the Thai context. The history of Thai Shakespeare theatrical performances, including both adapted and so-called 'authentic' versions, is chronologically listed and delineated, with special focus on some very recent stage productions in the Thai commercial theatre. Apart from an essential knowledge of Thai traditional drama which can lead to a general comparison between Shakespearean drama and Thai drama, the study also concentrates on the use of allusions to Shakespeare's plays and the exploitation of Shakespeare's dramatic plots in the modern Thai mass media. This is all done in the hope of shedding light on the future of Shakespearean activities in Thai literary and dramatic domains.

Theories and Research Methodology

Translation theories

By the time that Shakespeare was introduced into Siam in the late-nineteenth century, writing in narrative prose style was not recognized and not regarded as a proper form of literary writing in Siam. Siamese writers and readers were used to writing and reading poetic narrative tales in which the writers were required to follow strict literary conventions. Translating Shakespeare was no exception. His works were, therefore, adapted by using Siamese traditional poetic forms. In other words, at the beginning of his journey into Siamese literary circles, Shakespeare was completely transformed into a style of Siamese traditional writing which concealed his true literary identity. To provide analytical comment for the translation strategies adapted by Thai translators in translating Shakespeare's works, some translation theories are selected as the framework of this research, including polysystem theory, skopos theory and the concept of translation as rewriting. The thesis is based on the ideology that a translation is not the transcoding of words at a lexical level from one language into another, but an intricate form of cultural implantation. The translator acts as a medium in a multi-level approach to transfer information from a source text, influenced by his linguistic background and socio-cultural context, and tries to maintain both word and sense of the original as far as possible. In translating a literary text, which is itself created and conditioned by a particular socio-cultural context, the translator must see some relation between the source culture and his own target culture. With this specific purpose (whether hidden or transparent) in mind, he thus

decides on which texts should be translated and which should not. In other words, the selection of source texts to be translated depends on the purpose of the translator; moreover, his translation strategies are influenced by various socio-cultural factors from each different period.

Drama theories

Staging Shakespeare's plays in Thailand is another main focus in this thesis. The thesis provides an explanation of the Thai (Siamese) traditional dance drama from which Thai dramatic culture has shaped itself, the transformation of traditional dance drama and the influence of Western dramatic style, Shakespeare and his influence in Thai dramatic transformation, a historical review of Shakespeare productions staged in Thailand, and the use of Shakespeare and allusions to his works in Thai popular culture. This thesis also discusses the position of Shakespeare, who is central to the Western literary canon, in contemporary Thai popular culture. To analyse the Thai entertainments both traditional and contemporary forms, background knowledge of Thai dramatic context has to be provided. In Thailand, the division of dichotomous sets between 'High' and 'Low' cultures is distinctive. Evolving through different socio-political settings of the nation in different periods, Thai dramatic convention has always been divided into two groups, mainly based on the social status of the target audience. Although the dichotomous sets are referred to differently in different periods as Court versus Popular, Urban versus Rural, Central versus Periphery, the target audiences of each set always stay the same in terms of social class being understood as 'superior' or 'inferior'. Shakespeare is always positioned in the

front row of the ‘High’ literary and dramatic culture, in spite of the fact that his plays are well-equipped with excellent dramatic elements which are totally suited to Thai popular culture. This thesis thus tries to demonstrate that by side-lining Shakespeare’s fame and canonical image, Thai audiences belonging to the so-called ‘Low’ culture can also appreciate his plays from the context of all sorts of contemporary popular media.

On the subject of staging Shakespeare’s plays in Thailand, the concepts of drama adaptation and cultural aesthetic theory are used as the foundations of the content analysis. The thesis supports the ideology that artistic aesthetics, that is the perception of beauty in the arts which is sometimes referred to as ‘artistic taste’, is what people enjoy at any particular period and that it can be influenced and newly-shaped when alterations in political, social and cultural factors take place. This research disagrees with the concept of an absolute set of aesthetic standards which can be applied universally to works of art in different societies. In creating artistic products for mass target audiences, in theatre for instance, dramatists need to take into consideration the target audiences’ artistic taste in order to live up to audiences’ expectation. Those dramatists may sometimes have to compromise their own artistic tastes. Hence adaptation and appropriation play a vital role, especially in the staging of foreign plays.

Staging Shakespeare’s plays in modern Thai society is more challenging and innovative than the staging of his plays in the past when dramatic appropriation techniques were practised intensively to make Shakespeare less foreign to the Thai audiences’ perception. But since the country has also been affected by the power of globalisation, the attitude of Western otherness has been

gradually lessened in all aspects of life including theatrical practices. Thai audiences, especially those of Western education and familiar with the Western-influenced entertainment in metropolitan Bangkok, no longer expect much help from the production team to bridge the cultural gap between West and East; on the other hand, they are more open to new theatrical practices, including new interpretations and presentations of Western classics. However, bearing in mind that the target audience who would be willing to pay for tickets to see a Shakespeare production in Thailand is restricted, most production teams still have to overcome a similar difficulty, that of bringing Shakespeare down from his sacred altar to make his work accessible to broader Thai audiences, most of whom still embrace their different cultural background in dramatic conventions and taste.

This study is based largely on documentary research and personal interviews. The collections of Shakespeare translations in Thai by different translators, both published and unpublished, are examined. While part of the documentary research was done at the University of Warwick and in the SOAS Library (School of Oriental and African Studies) of the University of London, further archival research and interviews with translators and theatre practitioners, who have recently translated and staged Shakespeare's plays, have been conducted in Thailand. Some translated Shakespeare scripts, which have not yet been published but which were used to stage commercial productions, have also been consulted. Likewise, stage productions even though they are practised by an amateur theatre group (e.g. some university productions in Bangkok) are also discussed. However, the numerous unpublished translations of Shakespeare

created by academics for educational purposes, mainly for teaching, are excluded from this study.

Introduction

One of the most difficult words to define in the contemporary literary world is the word ‘Shakespeare’, not because we know so little about the man to whom the name refers, but because the knowledge we have accumulated about him is too vast and too profound. Despite the fact that scholars today are left with very scarce historical evidence relating to Shakespeare’s original works and his personal life, Shakespeare is still the subject of numerous detailed studies. No other writer in the world has been written about as much as Shakespeare has. The word ‘Shakespeare’ represents multi-layered meanings which vary from person to person across different parts of the globe. In England, Shakespeare-upon-Avon can simply refer to a local boy from the small village of Stratford who earned his living and made his name in show business by acting and writing playscripts in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. The journey has taken four hundred years to transform him from a plausibly forgotten Elizabethan poet to a deified literary figure. He is, as Thomas Carlyle (1840) puts it in simple terms, ‘the Peasant Who

Became a Prophet’.¹ The word ‘Shakespeare’ in contemporary recognition also refers to a subject of study in Western Literary Classics, which is established at all levels of education ranging from primary school to university level. In an abstract literary sense according to Shakespeare enthusiast and writer Stanley Wells in *Shakespeare for All Time*, the word may also refer to ‘an impression of the

¹ Quoted in G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* (London: Pelican Book, 1966), p. 21.

constantly evolving mind and imagination from which all the works emanated'.²

In the hybrid, intercultural theatre of the twenty-first century, Shakespeare can also be referred to as a brand name or a marketing gimmick in the 'Bardmart' theatre business. Among these countless representations of the word, perhaps the best definition of the word 'Shakespeare' in contemporary perception is by Jonathan Bate in the introduction to his book *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind, and World of William Shakespeare*:

[Shakespeare means] a body of words, characters, ideas and stage images that have remained alive for four centuries because of their endless capacity for renewal and adaptation through the work of succeeding generations of actor and spectators, appreciative readers, and creative artists in every conceivable medium.³

Shakespeare at the Centre of the Western Literary Canon

Whatever sense the name Shakespeare may represent to different people, Shakespeare is commonly accepted as one of the best known writers to grace the planet. Today, in readers' and audiences' perceptions, Shakespeare's name becomes synonymous with 'great literature', in the same manner that the name 'Einstein' is synonymous with 'great intelligence' or 'genius.' Shakespeare's name has been the most referenced, the most cross-referenced, the most analyzed,

² Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time* (London: Macmillan, 2002), p. 169.

³ Jonathan Bate, *Soul of the Age: The Life, Mind, and World of William Shakespeare* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 3.

the most written about, and his plays have been the most performed.⁴ Despite very scant historical evidence, every tiny segment of his works, not to mention his personal life, is investigated and analysed from various perspectives in every possible field of study. This is not only in language and literary studies but from the study of education to psychology. Shakespeare has secured his position as the global literary icon and has become his nation's pride, representing English culture and language. G.B. Harrison declares boldly that Shakespeare, as generally acknowledged, symbolizes English culture: 'no household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of *The Works of William Shakespeare*. [...] They must be presented as symbols of Religion and Culture.'⁵

Shakespeare has been credited for centuries as the writer who has achieved greatly in promoting English language and culture. Numerous expressions in English derive from, and have their origins in, his works. He has also been a source of aesthetic pleasure and intellectual stimulus to millions of readers and audiences around the world for four centuries.⁶ His works have influenced writers and artists of every generation; and the influence is not, of course, confined only within his own country but has spread to every corner of the world where the English language is learned and spoken. His plays, both in English and in translated languages, are central to the international theatrical repertoire and are performed around the globe in countless local dialects. Ben Crystal records in his

⁴ Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare on Toast: Getting a Taste for the Bard* (London: Icon Books Ltd., 2008), p. 32.

⁵ Harrison, p. 11.

recent book *Shakespeare on Toast: Getting a Taste for the Bard* that at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2007, which ran for only 22 days, there were over 30 productions, either of Shakespeare's plays or of shows that used Shakespeare's plays as a starting point.⁷ Modern forms of media – pop music, films, musicals, and television series – still carry his name for marketing purposes; his words are quoted in numberless movie and television scripts and song lyrics. To name a few, Elvis quotes him in his No. 1 hit 'Are You Lonesome Tonight?'; also in a very recent hit modern musical production, 'Legally Blonde the Musical', his name and his words are quoted in the last scene of the show. The record also shows that, in 2005 alone, there were sixteen films made of his plays.⁸

Many Shakespeare scholars try to fathom the singular excellence of Shakespeare – the difference in kind as well as in degree – which makes him stand out from all other writers. How did Shakespeare become 'the Bard' as we know him today? The answers, of course, vary. In *The Western Canon: the books and school of the ages*, Harold Bloom suggests that the outstanding qualities of Shakespeare which place him at the centre of the Western canon lie within three significant areas: his cognitive acuity, his linguistic energy, and his power of invention.⁹

His cognitive acuity – in other words, his understanding of human nature – is often mentioned as the first and foremost reason for Shakespeare being placed at the centre of the Western canon. Though it may sound like a cliché,

⁶ Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 403.

⁷ Crystal, p. 8.

⁸ Crystal, p. 8.

Shakespeare exceeds all other Western writers in his profound understanding of human nature. An influential English poet, John Dryden, calls him the poet who ‘had the largest and most comprehensive soul’.¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, in his preface to the Shakespeare of 1765, also calls him ‘the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life’.¹¹ These notions reflect Shakespeare’s stories and plots which could be shared in a heart felt manner by all human beings across language boundaries. As Stanley Wells puts it, Shakespeare generally writes about

things that matter to most people in most places at most times, they give classic dramatic and poetic expression to great commonplaces of human existence – love and friendship, hatred and malice, family relationships, parting and reunion, success and failure, loneliness and community, joy and grief, aggression and fear, good and bad government of both the self and the commonwealth.¹²

Another Shakespeare scholar, Laurie Maguire, furthers this view in her recent book *Where There’s A Will, There’s A Way*. She writes that each of Shakespeare’s plays depicts a human predicament and attempts a solution so readers and audience can easily relate to Shakespeare as they see some parts of themselves encounter similar dilemmas in their lives and find the ways to deal

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: the books and school of the ages* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 46.

¹⁰ Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 206.

¹¹ Bloom, p. 63.

¹² Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 172.

with them as do most of Shakespeare's characters.¹³ Through Shakespeare's plays, Maguire notes, '[we] hear their expression of our pain'.¹⁴ This outstanding quality of Shakespeare's stories certainly creates the ease of transference across boundaries. In other words, Shakespeare, as in his contemporary socio-cultural context, claims multi-cultural accessibility and universality due to his ability to get to people's hearts and souls across language, cultural and national boundaries. Through Shakespeare's plays audiences, despite their diverse cultural backgrounds, can easily see themselves through his characters. As Bloom records:

Students and friends have described for me Shakespeare as they have seen him in Japanese, Russian, Spanish, Indonesian, and Italian, and the general report has been that the audiences were as one in finding that Shakespeare represented *them* upon the stage.¹⁵

Apart from Shakespeare's outstanding insight, Bloom continues to illustrate Shakespeare's linguistic power, which among Western writers, 'has no equal'.¹⁶ It is hard to deny that Shakespeare has a vital influence in English language development. Francis Meres praised him highly as a significant poet by whom 'the English tongue is mightily enriched and gorgeously invested in rare

¹³ Laurie Maguire, *Where There's A Will, There's A Way* (London: Penguin Group, 2006), p. 2.

¹⁴ Maguire, p. 194.

¹⁵ Bloom, p. 51.

¹⁶ Bloom, pp. 59-60.

ornaments and resplendent habiliments'.¹⁷ It has been calculated that Shakespeare uses an exceptionally large vocabulary of between 20,000 and 30,000 words.¹⁸ Many of them are Shakespeare's original inventions which are still used today. Shakespeare is also renowned for his mastery of blank verse. His poetic signature – Shakespearean blank verse as we commonly call it – is an outcome of his lifetime of creation and of the continual development of his exercising of blank verse. If we are to compare his mastery in blank verse with a weapon – perhaps a firearm – the real bullet would definitely be his figurative language. His use of figurative language is distinctive. Bloom is convinced that, 'no more awesome panoply of metaphor exists'.¹⁹ During Shakespeare's time most plays, including Shakespeare's, had to make use of Latin tags and references to Latin literature. Latin, at that time, was regarded as a more developed language than English; therefore it was an important requirement for educated scholars and writers to be fluent in the language. In writing, most Elizabethan scholars and writers would create their metaphor by drawing most of their images from Latin classics. Shakespeare's metaphorical style is, however, different. His rhetorical style consists largely of an individual use of myths, symbols, and images; all of which mostly spring from his own personality, life experience, and his power of representation of human character.²⁰ This would not have been possible, had he not been immensely interested in, and an observer of, human behaviour. Shakespeare, though a less learned poet, is far more original in illustrating images

¹⁷ Quoted in Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 147.

¹⁸ Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 147.

¹⁹ Bloom, p. 60.

than elite authors of his time. His brilliant use of figurative language makes him stand out from other well-read poets. Without the need for the audience to refer back to Latin classics in order to understand the images, Shakespeare's figurative language can be vividly visualized and understood. Perhaps this explains why audiences from different circles, not to mention different parts of the world, can easily embrace Shakespeare's figurative images.

For Shakespeare's devoted fans, high praises are also aimed at his unmatched ability of story invention. Although some of Shakespeare's plots were apparently borrowed from Greek and Latin classics, Shakespeare innovatively adapted them all to suit his audiences' dramatic tastes. While most playwrights of his time held firmly onto the Greek dramatic model, for example the Aristotelian rules for tragedy which Sir Phillip Sidney explained, 'The stage should always represent but one place, and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be, both by Aristotle's precept and common reason, but one day', Shakespeare chose to ignore them and searched for his own innovative ways to represent the old stories.²¹ Shakespeare, in contrast, set most of his stories in diverse settings and places in a broad span of time. It is very less likely that Shakespeare was not aware of these rules, than that he ignored them, suggests Fintan O'Toole. This was 'because they [the rules] were not good enough to deal with the complexities of the world he was living in.'²² Shakespeare's inventions of exceptional and memorable characters are in particular the focus of attraction and admiration. The

²⁰ Harrison, p. 24.

²¹ Quoted in Fintan O'Toole, *Shakespeare is hard but so is life: A radical guide of Shakespearian Tragedy* (London and New York: Granta Books, 2002), p. 18.

²² O'Toole, p. 18.

characters that Shakespeare creates portray realistic human representations which are open to the audiences so that they explore the characters' psychological sides. Shakespeare's representation of characters, according to Bloom, 'gives us a stronger illusion that each character speaks with a different voice from the others [...] His uncanny ability to present consistent and different actual-seeming voices of imaginary beings stems in part from the most abundant sense of reality ever to invade literature.'²³ In the article 'Shakespeare in a Strange Land', Todd London furthers Bloom's observation on Shakespeare's outstanding invention of his characters by adding that the significant quality which makes these characters so true to life is not only that each of them sounds clearly distinctive from one another, but also the sense that they 'appear to be self-conscious – as if able to “overhear” themselves.'²⁴ The ability of 'self-overhearing' of the characters allows the access of multiple perspectives, which become analytical instruments for judging oneself. Bloom goes on illustrating how different types of audience could feel specially connected to Shakespeare's particular characters:

If you are a moralist, Falstaff outrages you; if you are rancid, Rosalind exposes you; if you are dogmatic, Hamlet evades you forever. And if you are an explainer, the great Shakespearean villains will cause you to despair.²⁵

²³ Bloom, p. 64.

²⁴ Todd London, 'Shakespeare in a Strange Land', in *American Theatre*, Vol. 15, Issue 6, July-August 1998 <[http://www. questia.com](http://www.questia.com)> [accessed 15 August 2008]

²⁵ Bloom, p. 64.

Shakespeare and His Worldwide Recognition

Shakespeare's works have become classed as high art among Western classics. Even in his own time Shakespeare's plays started to earn broad recognition and reputation outside British territory. The earliest historical record shows that in 1607 two Shakespeare's plays – *Hamlet* and *Richard II* – were performed by British sailors off the coast of Sierra Leone in West Africa. William Keeling, who was captain of an East India ship – 'the Dragon' – recorded in his diary on 5 September 1607 that 'we gave the tragedy of *Hamlet*' on board to entertain the crew when the Dragon had been long becalmed off the coast.²⁶ Aside from Keeling's record, there are other earlier accounts of continental performances. For example, at the court of Elsinore in Eastern Denmark from as early as 1585 an 'English Comedians' troupe – in which one prominent cast member was Will Kemp who was the main comedian in almost all Shakespeare's early plays – performed for three months.²⁷ Some of Shakespeare's plays had begun to make an appearance in Germany and Eastern Europe by the early 1600s, for example, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was recorded to be performed at Nördlingen, Germany, in 1604.²⁸ Throughout the eighteenth century the canonization continued. Shakespeare was at length established as the writer of significant Western classics and was now ancient enough for the public to demand deeper information about him. Hence, some efforts were made to restore his original texts. One of the most important editions was done in 1709 by a

²⁶ Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 209.

²⁷ Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare & CO.* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 32.

Restoration dramatist, Nicholas Rowe, who produced the first edited collection of Shakespeare's plays. Rowe was largely responsible for the structure in which Shakespeare's plays generally appear as we see today. He considerably revised the texts by adding place headings to the scenes and new stage directions. Furthermore, he added an introduction of Shakespeare's biography and some commendations.²⁹

Not long after his death, Shakespeare's status as a prestigious literary figure was secured in England. His plays were now performed in increasing numbers all over the British Isles and also in Europe; the repertoire was expanding too. The process of shaping Shakespeare's international presence thus began in Europe. At that time, European culture which used to be dominated by Latin and classical civilization, started to become more open to cultural exchanges from vernacular cultures. Shakespeare played a role in that shift. Indeed, Shakespeare and his plays seemed to be effortlessly embraced by the Europeans from the beginning. Anthony B. Dawson points out that Shakespeare's plays possess some qualities that facilitate his international acceptance; aside from convincing plots and realistic human characters, one of the key features is that Shakespeare sets almost all of his plays in European settings.³⁰ Excluding his historical plays, almost all of Shakespeare's plays are set beyond the borders of

²⁸ Anthony B. Dawson, 'International Shakespeare', *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 176.

²⁹ Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, pp. 209-11.

³⁰ Dawson, p. 176.

England, mostly in Europe. There are only four of them which are set in Britain – *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *Cymbeline*.³¹

Among all European countries, Germany seems to be the nation which most completely embraces Shakespeare as part of their own culture. In 1915 the German playwright Gerhart Hauptmann declared that Shakespeare's soul 'has become one with ours: and though he was born and buried in England it is in Germany that he is truly alive.' In 1916 another dramatist, Ludwig Fulda, stated that Shakespeare had been born in England by mistake: 'Our Shakespeare! ... Thus we may call him by right of spiritual conquest. And should we succeed in vanquishing England in the field, we should, I think, insert a clause into the peace treaty stipulating the formal surrender of William Shakespeare to Germany'.³² He also asserted that Shakespeare's plays were 'more frequently performed in Germany during a single year than during a whole decade in his native country'. Over centuries, German Shakespeare has demonstrated the success of their cultural domestication process – turning the Englishness of Shakespeare into German Shakespeare by constructing (and also deconstructing) the idea of cultural sovereignty.³³ His literary influence, however, goes beyond European territory.

Shakespeare and Asian Colonization

In the nineteenth century, Britain began to expand her territories to other parts of the world by means of colonization. Shakespeare came too, initially as a

³¹ Dawson, pp. 175-6.

³² Quoted in Wilhelm Hortmann, *Shakespeare on the German Stage: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3-4.

mainstay of the entertainment programme for British residents in English outposts.³⁴ The colonizers built theatres to stage their British plays. In *Shakespeare in China*, Murray J. Levith notes that, for the colonizers, ‘doing Shakespeare’ was ‘an unquestioned, if official, thread in the fabric of British expatriate colonial life’.³⁵ In Africa, for example, Shakespeare’s plays were accommodated comfortably within modern English-style theatre. In 1800, an amateur theatre called ‘The African Theatre’ was set up in Cape Town, South Africa, by the soldiers of the British garrison; Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* was the first play to be performed by this troupe. Since then, from the early-nineteenth century and throughout the mid-twentieth century onwards, Shakespeare’s plays – performed mainly in English – have had a significant presence in Africa and have been staged by both amateur colonial officers and by professional touring troupes from Britain.³⁶

Although Shakespeare’s plays were written to be put on stage, when the colonizers travelled the world they took Shakespeare’s works with them as texts to read rather than as plays to be performed. Perhaps in the first place, the colonizers did not intend to exhibit Shakespeare for any purpose of cultural exchange, but to enjoy his works as ‘literary comfort food to satisfy the British

³³ Dawson, p. 185.

³⁴ John Gillies, et al., ‘Shakespeare on the stages of Asia’, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 272.

³⁵ Murray J. Levith, *Shakespeare in China* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 94.

³⁶ Martin Banham, Roshni Mooneeram and Jane Plastow, ‘Shakespeare and Africa’, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 284.

expatriates' hunger for home'.³⁷ However, the notion that Shakespeare was the supreme genius of English writers became globally acknowledged, without a doubt, because of the spread of his playtexts. For most colonized nations it was imperative to learn the colonizers' language; English-language, therefore, was an important subject in the official school curriculum. At this point, Shakespeare played a vital role, serving as the colonial educational apparatus to implement English language and English culture in the colonized territories around the world. Since Shakespeare's works represent 'Western elite learning',³⁸ his role was shifted from that of providing the British colonizers with the impression of their own cultural security to, according to Levith, 'edify[ing] the "barbarians"'.³⁹ No student in colonized countries can avoid a detailed study of at least one of Shakespeare's plays. In India, for instance, English became the official language of administration and government-funded education in the early 1800s. Shakespeare's plays became the centre of a curriculum designed to produce 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and in intellect'.⁴⁰ In declamation contests which were held every year in India, it was apparent that the highest accolades were reserved for the recitation of scenes from Shakespeare. In a similar vein, native students who attended the government sponsored schools in Hong Kong and the Philippines – other British

³⁷ Levith, p. 94.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 94.

³⁹ Ibid., p. XIV.

⁴⁰ Indian Education Minute, quoted in Gillies et al., p. 273.

and American colonies – had to read Shakespeare as part of their study, as a mean of teaching them the language and transmitting English values.⁴¹

Many scholars of Shakespeare and postcolonialism frequently suggest the idea that Shakespeare's texts are, in one way or another, involved with colonialism and other forms of domination and the major driving force behind Shakespeare's international iconic status is actually Western colonization. This notion of the dominant and the recessive was an idea first posited by the scientific experimenter in patterns of heredity, Gregor Mendel, in the mid-nineteenth century. In the literary field it has been adopted to articulate a debate about dominance and suppression that is crucial for any consideration of intertextual relationship.⁴² This is especially true of Shakespeare more than of any other literary figure in the Western canon. By the eighteenth century Shakespeare's place in the British literary canon had been long secured. His works, therefore, offer a way to impose British civilization around the world. A Shakespeare scholar, Judy Celine Ick, suggests that 'Shakespeare comes *with* all this colonial baggage. Or more precisely, Shakespeare came *as* colonial baggage' [My italics].⁴³ Another academic, Patrick Colm Hogan, agrees that 'Shakespeare's status has both contributed to and, in part, resulted from the place his works have been given in a wide range of ideologies supporting various, and often brutal

⁴¹ Levith, p. 94.

⁴² Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), p. 18.

⁴³ Judy Celine Ick, 'And Never the Twain Shall Meet?: Shakespeare and Philippine Performance Traditions', *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, ed. by Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 182.

forms of domination'.⁴⁴ In 'Shakespeare and Japanese Theatre: Artists' and Scholars' Use of the 'Exotic'', Andrew Gerstle furthers a similar viewpoint on the subject by adding that Shakespeare's worldwide recognition and his deity status cannot be credited solely to his great poetic talent as a writer:

I think that his works deserve such recognition, but the extent of his world-wide popularity has had far more to do with the economic, political and military might of both the British and American empires than with the inherent genius of his plays. ...The nineteenth century Japanese elite accepted the genius of Shakespeare long before they knew anything much about the works themselves, mainly because of the power of the British Navy.⁴⁵

If it is true that Shakespeare gained his international fame chiefly because he 'came as colonial baggage', what then happened to the nations which were not officially colonized? Some of those countries, too, have embraced Shakespeare into their literary and dramatic cultures as deeply – or even more vigorously – than those which were enforced by colonial powers. To take some Asian nations as examples: in discussions about Shakespeare in Asia, the first three countries most frequently referred to in the context of Shakespeare studies and performances in Asia must be India, China, and Japan. While India experienced the full brunt of Western colonial power, the latter two did not. However, China

⁴⁴ Patrick Colm Hogan, 'Shakespeare, Eastern Theatre, and Literary Universals: Drama in the Context of Cognitive Science', *Shakespeare East and West*, ed. by Minoru Fujita and Leonard Pronko, Japan Library (Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd., 1996), p. 165.

and Japan share some political experiences: one that John Gillies (et al.) terms ‘the quasi-colonial experience’ and that Peter A. Jackson similarly calls ‘semi-coloniality’. The quasi-colonial experience, as defined by Gillies (et al.), is the process of adopting Western culture ‘partly by the desire to pre-empt full-colonial subjection’.⁴⁶ At the peak of the colonization period in Asia around the mid-nineteenth century, China and Japan had long enjoyed their superior status in this region and were more advanced than other Asian countries. China – then the longest established civilization and the most powerful nation in Asia – had practiced a policy of isolationism and had been closed to outside influences. By the desire to protect herself from Western penetration, China tried to resist foreign political and economic influences by restricting foreign trade. This proved to be unsuccessful. China was forced by the British Empire into the Opium wars and was defeated, leaving China’s government having to sign a treaty for the opening up of the country and for the cession of Hong Kong to Britain in 1842.⁴⁷ Japan, in a similar vein, also highly controlled its contacts with the outside world partly to maintain political domination and control. However, in 1854, a Western power – the American navy, not the British – steamed into Japan and insisted upon the opening of Japan to international trading. In response to such threatening actions from the West, Japan also finally became open for a process of westernization yet still maintained national sovereignty.

⁴⁵ Andrew Gerstle, ‘Shakespeare and Japanese Theatre: Artists’ and Scholars’ Use of the ‘Exotic’’, *Shakespeare East and West*, ed. by Minoru Fujita and Leonard Pronko, Japan Library (Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd., 1996), p. 69.

⁴⁶ Gillies (et al.), p. 272.

Written in 1953, *The Imperialism of Free Trade* by Gallagher and Robinson asserts that '[Western colonizers'] refusals to annex are no proof of reluctance to control.'⁴⁸ Even though some Asian nations were not officially colonized or their indigenous regimes replaced, the impact of 'the imperialism of free trade' – by which the colonizers imposed unequal trading treaties and extraterritorial legal regimes (signed with China in 1842 and Japan in 1858) – was massive. It was this dual political strategy which in a way left no choice for these non-colonized Asian countries but to become the colonizer's 'informal empire'. The state of being semi-colonial happened when Asian economies and legal systems were forced to conform to Western norms while political regimes, education systems, and cultural production remained in local hands.⁴⁹ While not colonized directly, these Asian countries were nevertheless subordinated to Western imperial power by means of unfair 'free trade' and army forces. Although the usual representation of the policy of the free trade empire was 'trade not rule', the hidden message could be read clearly, 'trade with informal control if possible; trade with rule when necessary'.⁵⁰ Such imposition of treaties, according to Gallagher and Robinson, was 'perhaps the most common political technique of British expansion'. Under the treaties of so-called 'free trade and

⁴⁷ *The Opium War and the Opening of China*,
<<http://historyliterature.homestead.com/files/extended.html>> [accessed 23 February 2010], para. 2 of 32.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Peter A. Jackson, 'The Performative State: Semi-Coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand', *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 19, Issue 2 (2004) <<http://www.questia.com>> [accessed 12 February 2009], para. 18 of 43.

⁴⁹ Jackson, *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, para. 17 of 43.

⁵⁰ Gallagher and Robinson, quoted in Jackson, *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, para. 9 of 43.

friendship' it was made clear that 'the capitulations [extraterritorial legal regimes] would remain until the uncivilized country civilized itself along Western lines'.⁵¹ This put pressure on Asian countries to self-civilize in order to match standards of civilization imposed by the West – as a legal condition for the abolition of the extraterritorial regimes. The process of self-civilizing, nevertheless, was not achieved by amicable methods of 'cultural borrowing' or 'cultural imitation'; it was imposed as an explicit requirement of the regime of capitulations.⁵²

Driven by this political pressure, China and Japan were opened for, and immersed themselves in, intense westernization and modernization in all aspects of life, including art, philosophy, and science. Shakespeare, without a doubt, played an important role as the prestigious representative of Western high art; thus studying Shakespeare was an explicit way for these countries to prove themselves to be as civilized as the Western colonizers. This clear notion could be observed in writings by many Chinese and Japanese scholars during that period. For example, Lu Xun (considered by many the father of modern Chinese literature) in his essays written when he was a student in Japan in 1907 praises Shakespeare for the quality of being able to civilize people:

⁵¹ David P. Fidler, 'A Kinder, Gentler System of Capitulations? International Law, Structural Adjustment Policies, and the Standard of Liberal, Globalised Civilisation', *Texas International Law Journal*, 35, no. 3 (Texas: The University of Texas School of Law, 2000), p. 393.

⁵² Jackson, *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, para. 23 of 43.

A society needs [...] not only Newton but also Shakespeare [because] a writer like Shakespeare can make people have a sound and perfect human nature [that is, become more human].⁵³

Translating and Staging Shakespeare in Asia: An Overview

For both China and Japan, as the countries most actively engaged in Shakespearean activities in Asia, Shakespeare was first introduced by their Western educated scholars and writers – yet in disguise not as his true self. In most Asian countries, Shakespeare's works were tentatively made known through the pioneering translations and adaptations of the internationally renowned version of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. The very first translated version, perhaps among all Asian countries, was done by Charles Wirgman in Japanese in 1874; the first published appearance of Lamb's tales in China was seen almost twenty years later in 1903. But it was not until the early-twentieth century that a full playtext by Shakespeare was translated into standard Japanese and Chinese and published in book form.⁵⁴ According to historical records, the first and most memorable complete translation of Shakespeare's plays in Asia was accomplished by a Japanese professor and theatre practitioner, Tsubouchi Shoyo, who translated Shakespeare into the old-fashion language of the traditional theatrical form of *kabuki*. In his memoirs written in the 1890s, Tsubouchi recorded the impression he had while seeing English and American

⁵³ Levith, p. 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

troupes playing Shakespeare in daily repertory at the Gaiety Theatre in Yokohama. The pleasurable theatre experiences inspired him to translate Shakespeare's plays and he made Shakespeare his life work. Publishing his first translation, *Julius Caesar*, in 1884 at the age of twenty-five, he eventually completed the translation of all Shakespeare's plays and sonnets forty-four years later in 1928.⁵⁵ His translations are very popular so that the first Chinese and Korean Shakespeare translations were translated from his Japanese versions rather than from the original English.⁵⁶ Throughout the twentieth century Shakespeare translations in China and Japan have been conducted by different translators and published in many versions. Each translation was dependent on the main objective of the text use. Some were translated to be read and some were specifically translated to be staged. In Japan since Tsubouchi's first translation in the late-nineteenth century, Shakespeare translation has been continuously practised by different translators. For *Hamlet* alone, there are more than ten versions in the Japanese language. (The latest translated version was completed in 2002 by Kawai Shochiro.)⁵⁷

In Japan, Shakespeare seems to have taken root securely and his works has been assimilated within the Japanese theatrical culture. One way or another, Shakespearean drama seems to have had a strong influence in Japanese theatrical development. From the first staging of a Shakespearean play in Japanese – *The*

⁵⁵ James R. Brandon, 'Other Shakespeare in Asia', *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, ed. by Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 23-4.

⁵⁶ Gillies (et al.), p. 260.

⁵⁷ Yukari Yoshihara, 'Is this Shakespeare?: Inoue Hidenori's Pop Adaptation of Shakespeare', *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, ed. by Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 144.

Merchant of Venice (which was adapted into traditional Japanese *kabuki* form in 1885) – Japanese theatre practitioners seem to have found their oasis for dramatic creation and experimentation. It is especially visible in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as the starting point of the globalization phenomenon, when Western directors, playwrights and actors, like others in art and music, started to look to Oriental theatre for the revitalization of Western theatre and for new inspiration to break away from the current overwhelming tendencies towards realism and naturalism in Western theatre.⁵⁸ Japanese theatre was one of the most exotic oriental sources that could capture the Westerner's attention. Andrew Gerstle describes two main objectives of the West for adapting alien forms from the East:

[...] one was to free artists from conventions in their own tradition which had come to seem unbearably constricting, [...] and this 'exotic' encounter underlies the thrust towards modernism; and the second, especially in the case of drama, was to recapture something that was thought to have been lost during the process of industrialization and subsequent urbanization.⁵⁹

The internationally successful Japanese Shakespeare adaptation of *Macbeth* into a feudal Japanese setting by Akira Kurosawa in *Throne of Blood* (1957) is a clear example. The exchanges of traditional theatrical techniques and indigenous forms between Japan and the West resulted in a wide variety of

⁵⁸ Gerstle, p. 65.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 65-6.

sensational experimental productions from both sides. When the Tokyo Globe was opened in 1988, Japan became a fixture on the international touring circuit of leading international companies in Asia, including a wide range of international Shakespearean productions. Contemporary Japanese Shakespeare theatres flourish and are diverse. Shakespeare's plays are performed in a cascade of productions which give opportunities to Japanese audiences to have experience of a diversity of theatrical presentations – both indigenised and westernised styles and also both in translation-based and adaptation-based forms. The leading Japanese writer Inoue Hisashi, who attempts to demonstrate the deconstruction of the Bard to create an indigenous work in his play *Shakespeare in the Twelfth Year of the Tempō Era* – first performed in 1974 and restaged many times afterwards – writes to reflect Shakespeare's popularity in Japan even though with some intended ridicule and ironic remarks:

If Shakespeare had not existed,

There would be numerous Shakespeare scholars without their PhD's.

If Shakespeare had not existed,

Tons of publishers would be at a loss for they cannot make a killing

on his complete works.⁶⁰

.....

Had it not been for Shakespeare,

The Shingeki ["new drama"] world, which had produced few original plays,

⁶⁰ Quoted in Yoshihara, p. 142.

Would be quite at a loss.

Shakespeare is a rich chest, source of income.

As long as he is with us, we will never starve.

Shakespeare is a rice granary, a substantial food source.⁶¹

And perhaps because Shakespeare ‘is a rich chest, source of income’, some Japanese productions apparently use Shakespeare’s name for marketing and public relations purposes and called their productions ‘adaptations’ of Shakespeare’s works. Some of these recent so-called ‘adaptations’ even brought up post-performance questions and vigorous debates among audiences as to whether the Shakespearean production they had just seen deserved to be called a Shakespeare play at all. Such controversial productions seemed to have ‘almost nothing to do with Shakespeare’s original, except for their titles, use of Shakespeare’s main characters and loose similarities in basic plots’.⁶² Yoshihara Yukari observes this phenomenon in some recent Japanese Shakespeare productions, particularly Inoue Hidenori’s pop adaptations of Shakespeare, in her article ‘Is This Shakespeare?: Inoue Hidenori’s Pop Adaptation of Shakespeare’ and she raises the question: ‘Do they simply use Shakespeare as a brand name, as a marketing gimmick in “Bardmart”?’ While she leaves the readers to ponder over the question, she concludes her observation that there is a very thin, vague line to distinguish the ‘proper’ Shakespeare’s productions from the ‘improper’ ones:

⁶¹ Quoted in Gillies (et. al.), p. 262.

⁶² Yoshihara, p. 152.

[W]hen the simplistic dichotomy between the global and the local, the sophisticated and the tacky, high art and pop, cannot be easily maintained, when the line between ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ Shakespeare is hard to determine and defend.⁶³

In different times and places, Shakespeare seems to always have been associated with the national hopes and ambitions of certain cultural or linguistic groups, starting with the English and then spreading, far beyond the imagination of the creator, to other parts of the world.⁶⁴ It more or less sounds like a cliché now to say that Shakespeare earns his word-wide reputation because he has an extraordinary talent ‘to portray individual characters [...] and fascinatingly explore the psychology of these exceptional people’. It is this that makes his plays more ‘universal’ than those of other writers.⁶⁵ It might also sound even too naive to jump to the conclusion that Shakespeare possesses a miraculous quality that easily fits into every culture and is able to get into people’s souls across barriers of time and races; as Ben Jonson wrote four hundred years ago: ‘he was not of an age, but for all time.’ As aforementioned, it is undeniable that colonization and cultural domination during the nineteenth century played a significant role in promoting ‘Bardolatry’. Shakespeare’s international-deity status is partly the result of the fact that he just happened to be with the strongest hand of power at the right period of time. As David Buck put it recently in his introduction to a ‘Forum of Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies’:

⁶³ Yoshihara, p. 153.

⁶⁴ Dawson, pp. 175-6.

In practice, universalist positions have been expressed by individuals with a strong sense of the superiority and correctness of their values. In the development of Asian Studies as we know it, this meant that Europeans and North Americans – that is called ‘the West’ – chauvinistically held that their civilization as superior to others.⁶⁶

Patrick Colm Hogan then furthers the point that the claim of universalism ‘relies on the very notion of difference that the opponents of universalism valorize’.⁶⁷ As ‘universalism’ at some point was determined by the dominant hand of power that is the West, the notion of Shakespeare’s ‘universality’ thus has been questioned and criticized by many contemporary Asian scholars. A Japanese professor of English literature at Tokyo University, Soseki Natsume, rejected the extravagant claims of Shakespearean universality, unequivocally stating that ‘the poetry created by Shakespeare does not possess that universality that European critics ascribe to it.’ Soseki believed that each culture or nation has its own standards and values and that these need to be applied to Shakespeare.⁶⁸ What really is ‘universal’ in the literary domain, suggests Paul Kiparsky, is literature itself. Universality cannot be found in any particular poets’ or writers’ works but in literature itself as all cultures have a literature, in the aesthetic sense.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 143.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Hogan, p. 165.

⁶⁷ Hogan, p. 166.

⁶⁸ Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, pp. 25-6.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Hogan, p. 167.

Similarly, the notion of ‘Asian Shakespeare’ seems to suggest an ambiguity and incoherent inference. In the past few decades, Shakespeare scholars have started to pay more attentions to Shakespearean activities conducted in Asia. Before that, Shakespeare in Asia, especially translated and localized Shakespeare ‘remain[ed] an area of darkness’.⁷⁰ Since Asia, geographically, is so vast and full of cultural diversity – covering two-thirds of the world’s land mass and over half the world’s population with countless languages and local dialects – Shakespeare in Asia, to be sure, is no less diverse. It is very hard to pinpoint what exactly the term ‘Asian Shakespeare’ means. It could refer to a Shakespearean production which is staged in Asia, played by an Asian cast, directed by Asian directors, and translated into one of the Asian languages. It may refer to those Shakespearean productions which are adapted into indigenous Asian forms e.g. Japanese *kabuki*, Cambodian mask dance drama, Malay *bangsawan*, etc. Perhaps it includes those adaptations of Shakespeare into other visual forms of Asian popular media for example, Japanese’s *manga*, or some play-station games. Because the term ‘Asian Shakespeare’ remains equivocal, there are some stage productions (as aforementioned, in Japan) that challenge an open debate among the audience as to whether they should be labelled as Shakespearean productions at all.

Asian Shakespeare, akin to Shakespeare presentations in other continents outside Europe, has been a subject of disapproval among some Shakespeare scholars with a clear mind-set of what can and cannot be called Shakespearean drama. Those scholars are highly protective towards the ‘purity’ of Shakespeare’s

⁷⁰ Poonam Trivedi, ‘Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia: An Introduction’, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, ed. by Poonam Trivedi and Minami Ryuta (London: Routledge,

texts. The focus of their attack is the claim that Asian Shakespeare (sometimes, in a broader sense, International Shakespeare) is not faithful to, and most likely devalues, Shakespeare's original texts. Barbara Hodgdon, for instance, calls international performance of Shakespeare a 'resource for mapping the poetics and politics of cultures' but betrays an anxiety about the rights of dead playwrights and the increasing prevalence of 'minimalist textual Shakespeare' in international performance. Another Shakespeare scholar, W.B. Worthen, shares his viewpoint of 'other Shakespeares' in *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance* suggesting that they have 'an inability to reflect an authentic Shakespeare'.⁷¹ Obviously, most of the strong accusations of non-authenticity, 'other', Shakespeare come from Western points of view. The notion somehow carries a connotation that Shakespeare belongs to Western civilization and it is almost impossible that people from 'other' civilizations would be able to absorb and comprehend the Bard the way he has been absorbed in the West. It is undeniably true at some point that 'other' Shakespeare – perceived by the 'other' with different cultural background and interpretation – can never be completely akin to 'authentic' Shakespeare according to the West's definition. However, the notion of 'authentic Shakespeare' itself has never been fully clarified.

What qualities then can be seen or categorized as 'true' or 'authentic' Shakespeare? Does it refer to textual translation of Shakespeare's original texts? Does it mean the use of Shakespeare's Elizabethan-English language? Or, in

2010), p. 4.

⁷¹ Quoted in Trivedi, p. 5.

performance, does it mean the performance of the plays in Elizabethan theatrical style? What exactly is the ‘core’ or ‘essence’ of Shakespeare’s plays? If all translations and performances of Shakespeare in all ‘other’ cultures are required to meet the Western standard of authenticity, it would definitely be more likely to fail to do so as the task seems to be impossible to accomplish in the first place. In terms of translation, Lorna Hardwick, author of a book on intercultural translation and ancient text translation, suggests that the task facing the translator of ancient text is to produce translations that go beyond the immediacy of the text and seek to articulate in some way the cultural framework within which that text is embedded. Moreover it is the very act of translation that enables contemporary readers to construct lost civilizations.⁷² Hardwick’s suggestion could also be considered in terms of performance. In the case of Shakespeare’s playtexts, like other ancient text presentation, they have been intensively and variously adapted to fit contemporary contexts in order to suit a contemporary audience’s frame of reference. However, according to Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, the adapter of the texts, even though he or she might be the one who makes all the decisions and interpretations of the target adaptive text, should not be solely blamed for the product being considered dissatisfactory. The full impact of an adaptation also depends upon an audience’s awareness of an explicit relationship to the source text:

⁷² Quoted in Susan Bassnett, ‘Culture and Translation’, *A Companion to Translation Studies*, ed. by Piotr Kuhiwczak and Karin Littau (London: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2007), p. 15.

The desire to make the relationship with the source explicit links to the manner in which the responses to adaptations depend upon a complex invocation of ideas of similarity and difference. These ideas can only be mobilized by a reader or spectator alert to the intertextual relationship, and this in turn requires the deployment of well-known texts or sources.⁷³

Dramatic adaptation of Shakespearean playtexts is nothing new; it has become routine since it began in the West as early as the Restoration in England. In addition, it is not confined to theatre performances but also includes poetry, novels, films, animations, and television advertisements. These various forms of the entertainment media have all engaged with Shakespeare as both icon and author.⁷⁴ The practice of Shakespeare adaptation has already been found in Western contemporary theatre to be even more fruitful than what can be seen in Asia. So what is so different and so wrong with Asian Shakespeare? Sanders goes further in the discussion and points out that the intellectual or scholarly examinations of an adaptation should not be aimed at identifying ‘good’ or ‘bad’ quality:

On what grounds, after all, could such a judgement be made? Fidelity to the original? [...] it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place. The sheer possibility of testing fidelity in any tangible way is surely also in question when we are dealing with

⁷³ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), p. 22.

⁷⁴ Sanders, p. 46.

such labile texts as Shakespeare's plays. Adaptation studies are, then, not about making polarized value judgments, but about analyzing process ideology, and methodology.⁷⁵

In 'Other Shakespeares in Asia: An Overview', James R. Brandon is the first Shakespeare scholar to take a pan-Asia perspective and to give a synoptic view of the theatrical and social history of the engagement of major Asian countries with Shakespeare. Brandon puts tendencies of performing Shakespeare in Asia into three categories: canonical, indigenous and intercultural. He states firmly that Shakespeare, everywhere in Asia, 'represents the importation, and possibly imposition, of a foreign, and potentially dominant, culture'.⁷⁶ Furthermore, Brandon delineates how in most areas colonialism or Western hegemony was responsible for the introduction of a 'faithful' Shakespeare either as mimicry or as a resistance.⁷⁷ Despite the massive disparity of Asian nations and cultures, Brandon, however, concludes that there are remarkable similarities in Shakespeare performance throughout Asia in the sense that these performances of Shakespeare 'vary less by nationality or culture of audiences and more by the theatrical circumstances of Shakespeare's adoption'.⁷⁸

The first and foremost category of Shakespeare performance in Asia according to Brandon is what he terms 'Canonical Shakespeare'. Canonical Shakespeare occurs when Asian Shakespeare practitioners (i.e. translators, theatre

⁷⁵ Sanders, pp. 19-20.

⁷⁶ Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, p. 21.

⁷⁷ Trivedi, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, p. 21.

practitioners, directors and actors) aim to ‘replicate Shakespeare in ‘doublet and hose’’.⁷⁹ The local practitioners were most likely to cling onto the very concept of imitation to assure ‘authenticity’ of their Shakespearean productions; they, therefore, tried to reproduce the productions that ‘function like the Covent Garden or the Drury Lane’.⁸⁰ In terms of translation practices, the early translations of Shakespeare’s plays were similarly done by translators who carried the ultimate goal of preserving the ‘authentic’ voice of Shakespeare in a vernacular language. Some Shakespeare translations, such as some early Chinese translations, were found attempting to fit Shakespeare’s blank verse into indigenous verse forms, including use of poetic forms based on syllable count.⁸¹ However, the reason that the dramatic replication became a common practice was of course not because the local practitioners lacked theatrical creativity; it was rather that they tried to show respect for the original art object, as Brandon describes:

We replicate so as not to adulterate or vulgarize the original. Replication is an appropriate performance mode when the aim is to reproduce a canonical Shakespeare in all its Englishness.⁸²

This type of production was practised frequently in most early Shakespeare dramatic activities in Asia, both in translations and theatre productions, when colonialism was still the vital socio-political factor. In case of

⁷⁹ Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, p. 26.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

semi-colonial countries – namely China, Japan and Korea – Shakespeare was exploited by local intellectuals as part of ‘their quest to overcome feudal thought in their societies and to modernize their cultures’.⁸³ At the same time, Shakespeare was sought out partly as a political and diplomatic means to protect the nations against Western intrusion and partly for personal intellectual enlightenment. However, canonical Shakespeare practice has faded in popularity in contemporary Asia as the concept of complete replication does not sit well with many theatre artists in Asia and the West.⁸⁴

The second type of Asian Shakespeare performance as categorized by Brandon is called ‘Indigenous Shakespeare’; this practice of appropriation is sometimes referred to by different terms such as ‘localized’, ‘domesticated’, ‘acculturated’ or, as suggested by Javed Malick, ‘nativizing’ productions.⁸⁵ As explained by Brandon, indigenous Shakespeare is ‘[the productions that] have been assimilated into indigenous theatre genres to the point of disappearance such that their foreign origin is largely erased’.⁸⁶ In other words, this type of Shakespeare production relies heavily on knowledge of indigenous dramatic traditions to which local audiences are accustomed and have experienced. Brandon points out one of the most distinctive characteristics of indigenous Shakespeare performance that it must conceal its foreign origins so that audiences are often unaware that a ‘foreign’ play is being staged. Canonical and indigenous Shakespeares have coexisted for decades.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 23.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 23-6.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, p. 27.

During the twentieth century after the era of colonialism, localized performances seemed to gain more popularity among local audiences than the canonical performances. Unsurprisingly, these localized productions frequently became a subject of strong criticism by Anglicized academic Shakespeare scholars – most of whom support or produce canonical Shakespeare productions – for their inability to represent Shakespeare’s ‘original spirit’. This was a very common complaint made of early localized performances throughout Asia. The conflict of ideas between these two groups of theatre practitioners, however, is perfectly comprehensible; it originates from the differences of dramatic taste, interest, and value between these two groups of practitioners. Whereas the canonical Shakespeare supporters who are mostly Western-educated elites savour original Shakespeare, indigenous theatre practitioners (most of whom are from the lower, or less-educated, classes in society) enjoy adapting Shakespeare to become their own; they therefore hold very different aesthetic viewpoints and expectation from their play productions.⁸⁷

Brandon concludes his discussion by pointing out that between these two practices, it is impossible and in a way useless to pinpoint which theatrical style is a more appropriate way to represent Shakespeare on stage – as both styles are designed for fulfilling different purposes and different target audiences:

In sum, a canonical reading and production in India, Japan, China, or elsewhere in Asia aims at representing the authentic English foreignness of Shakespeare for an Asian audience. This aim requires a direct translation of the

⁸⁶ Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, p. 26.

text, although the style of translation may vary greatly, and a (realistic) replication of European setting, costume, and acting in performance. [...] The aim of localized production, on the other hand, is to absorb the Shakespearean story and retell it as an Indian or Chinese or Japanese story. This aim requires wholesale textual adaptation, while in performance the play's local authenticity is reinforced by expression through indigenous theatrical techniques. What was foreign is glossed by the audience as familiar.⁸⁸

The third type of Asian Shakespeare performance is what Brandon tentatively terms 'Intercultural Shakespeare'. The theatrical style of Shakespeare presentation has become a phenomenon in Asia during the past 40 years. Brandon clarifies this type of Shakespeare performance as those 'based on confrontation of the textual values of canonical Shakespeare with the immediacy and vitality of indigenous theatre techniques and aesthetics.' In other words, intercultural Shakespeare is the combination of concepts between canonical Shakespeare and indigenous Shakespeare when 'Elite tastes jostle with the plebeian'.⁸⁹ An intercultural production balances the best parts of the two: the global textual authority of Shakespeare favoured by the canonical Shakespeare scholars and the local theatrical techniques mastered by the indigenous practitioners. This appropriating practice has been conducted variously and intensively in Asia, particularly in Japan. From the 1960s onwards, modern Japanese directors started to feel confident enough to find their own way to represent Shakespeare on the

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 27-9.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

Japanese stage without following the footsteps of Western theatre. Akihiko Senda a Japanese Shakespeare academic and theatre journalist delineates the movement of modern Japanese theatre from the 1960s to the 1980s and the attempt to search for new 'dramatic energy' from Shakespeare's plays. According to Senda in 'The rebirth of Shakespeare in Japan: from the 1960s to the 1990s', the 1960s was the period of dramatic experiments in Japan. Most Japanese troupes shut the door to Western dramatic influence; they ceased to stage plays from existing Western playscripts whereas they tried to present only those plays written by Japanese playwrights. However, the road of such experiments finally met a cul-de-sac in the late 1980s and the troupes then returned to Western classics, specifically Shakespeare, with high hopes of finding new energy. Senda writes:

[F]rom their desperate attempts to find a way out of this blockage arose a marked tendency to direct their attention to classics. By borrowing solid dramatic structure as well as large-scale stories from Shakespeare's plays, they intended to charge their stages once again with dramatic energy. [...] they tried to project upon Shakespearean texts the mental climate of contemporary Japan, or the social situation of Asia, in order to create a new drama.⁹⁰

The idea that Shakespeare can be the endless source of new dramatic creation for Asian theatre was supported by Tadashi Suzuki, a prolific contemporary Japanese director. Suzuki found that the complete imitation of the

⁹⁰ Akihiko Senda, 'The rebirth of Shakespeare in Japan: from the 1960s to the 1990s', trans. by Ryuta Minami in *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. by Takashi

Western Shakespeare production in standard canonical practice ‘seem [...] nothing but dull and shoddy [...] since such imitations can never surpass the originals’. For Suzuki, Shakespeare’s playtexts became more challenging when he ‘[had] no choice but to start tackling Shakespeare with our uniquely Japanese sense of theatre.’⁹¹

Not only do modern Asian directors search for innovative ways (based on their own mastery in traditional theatre) to stage Shakespeare, another theatrical challenge is to try to find new meanings that make good sense out of Shakespeare’s old texts for contemporary audiences who, according to Brandon, ‘live daily with one foot rooted in local, traditional culture and the other foot planted in a contemporary globalized commodity culture’.⁹² Intercultural Shakespeare performance has become an open platform of dramatic creativity for Asian directors to ‘[create] a new play by incorporating their newly invented ideas and devices into the established patterns embedded in well-known history or stories’.⁹³ Ryuta Minami, however, looks from a slightly different angle and points out that while a Western director today tends to read Shakespeare for new meanings, Asian directors ‘do not read Shakespeare for contemporary meanings, but they write contemporary meanings into Shakespeare’.⁹⁴

Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30.

⁹¹ Quoted in Senda, p. 21.

⁹² Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, p. 31.

⁹³ Senda, p. 30.

⁹⁴ Brandon, *Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, p. 34.

Part One

Translating Shakespeare in Thailand

Chapter I

Shakespeare's Introduction to Thailand: An Overview

Each Asian country has a story of its own when it comes to the history of relationship-building with Shakespeare and his works. The details of how each nation has received and assimilated Shakespeare's works into their local literary cultures is inevitably influenced by their cultural disparity. For example, while Indian, Hong Kong and Filipino Shakespeare can be, to some extent, related to colonialism and post-colonialism, the perspectives from these countries may not be applicable to the Japanese or Chinese situations. Similarly, even though China and Japan shared some political resemblance in national policy during the colonization period, the ways in which they embraced Shakespeare into their unique cultures is undoubtedly different. John Gillies (et al.) suggests:

Shakespeare's assimilation into India is not a pattern for his assimilation into China and Japan. Nor is Shakespeare's assimilation into China a variant of his assimilation into Japan. While in some ways alike, these histories do not really fit together.¹

Not only have most leading Asian nations long constructed their distinctive relationships with Shakespeare: one small vulnerable nation in

¹ John Gillies, et al., 'Shakespeare on the stages of Asia', *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 259.

Southeast Asia – Thailand (known as Siam² before the country changed to constitutional monarchy in 1932) – has a story of her own when it comes to connection with the Bard. For Thai people, Shakespeare was not imposed by the force of Western colonizers and put into the national curriculum as a compulsory part of the subject of English (as generally happened to Asian colonies), nor has Shakespeare put down roots and had a strong impact on indigenous theatre modernization as happened to the non-colonial Asian nations like China and Japan. Shakespeare, in relation to Thailand, is another and very different story.

Basically, there are two closely-related socio-political factors that helped in shaping the existence of ‘Thai Shakespeare’ as it is seen today. The first is the historical fact that during the peak colonization period, Siam was the only country in Southeast Asia which was never colonized by any Western power. Nevertheless, like China and Japan, the nation could not avoid Western incursion and had to maintain unofficially the state of a ‘semi-colonial’ nation under many inequitable treaties initiated by the West. At this point, Siam, sharing similar faith to that in China and Japan, was forced to become open to Westernization. Without actual threat of forceful acts from the West, Siam started on her own the intensive process of self-westernization. The second factor, which in a way developed from the first, was the national construction process of the ‘regime of images’ – an intense bordering and contextualization of cultural norms of behaviour and

² In 1932 an elite group of French-educated civil servants and soldiers overthrew the absolute monarchy of the king and replaced it with a constitutional monarchy. To symbolize the change in regimes, the new leadership dropped the name Siam, favored by the monarchists, for the more modern-sounding Thailand. But during the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), Thailand was still known as Siam. This thesis, therefore, uses the name Siam when referring to King Vajiravudh and his period.

representation.³ The idea of the ‘regime of images’ in traditional Siamese culture has been thoroughly delineated by Peter A. Jackson in ‘The Performative State: Semi-Coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand’. The practice of the ‘regime of images’ in Siam during the colonization period sprang from the vigorous national self-westernization, initially exercised by the leading groups of the nation including royal family members, noble elites and intellectuals. The intention was to build an illusionary ‘equal-to-the-West’ image by westernizing their native lifestyle in every possible cultural aspect. The ‘regime of images’, however, created a clear division between the ‘Westernized’ (or ‘civilized’) surface which was displayed to, and clearly seen by, the public and the indigenous Siamese domain which was hidden under the surface. According to Jackson, this state developed because there was no direct compulsion from Western colonizers for non-colonized Siam to reform totally all levels within its social order.⁴ In other words, because the nation was not directly colonized, it was left some room still to enjoy, cherish, and maintain its own indigenous culture while, on the public surface, it presented a Westernized image (without any deeply-attached connection with the ‘superior’ Western culture). The trace of this system can still be seen in present-day Thailand, particularly in the assimilation of Western culture into Thai culture.

So how do these socio-political factors relate to Shakespeare in Thailand? Shakespearean activities in Thailand are not very extensive compared to those practised in Japan and China; however, they are not so small as to deserve no

³ Peter A. Jackson, ‘The Performative State: Semi-Coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand’, *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, Vol. 19, Issue 2 (2004) <<http://www.questia.com>> [accessed 12 February 2009], para. 43.

⁴ Jackson, para.1.

research attention. Thai Shakespeare, like other Asian Shakespeares, has its own characteristics which are worth examining academically. Although a play by Shakespeare was first translated into the Thai language almost a century ago, translation activities have not been conducted successively and actively by the new generation of Thai translators. In a similar vein, staging Shakespeare in Thailand has never made the impact of a theatrical phenomenon, nor captured the attention of the Thai popular audience, despite the fact that many professional theatre troupes have tried to guarantee their box office success by staging Shakespeare in big-scale productions, featuring big-named television and movie stars. Shakespeare in Thailand is essentially in a self-contradictory state. He is no doubt the most renowned foreign writer and his name is familiar among common Thai readers and audiences, not only to educated literary scholars in school and university. Nonetheless, his works have rarely been widely read, translated or staged beyond the circle of the educated elites. If I place myself among Thai people in general (who have at least the compulsory level of education) and speak their minds about Shakespeare, the common response will probably be something like: 'We know him but we are not actually fond of him or his works. We respect him and in the meantime are more or less afraid of his iconic literary status and his language.'

Initially, in my research, I attempted to find some possible and sensible reasons behind the unpopularity of Shakespeare in contemporary Thailand. As a compulsory core subject of English Literature, his work has been studied in Thai universities for almost a century. However, research studies on the subject of Shakespeare in Thailand are still very limited and, those that do exist, are

confined within the bigger subject-heading of English Literature. There have been no prior studies or official records of the history of Shakespeare in Thailand, just some fragmentary pieces of information here and there under the subjects of English Literature, Thai Literature, Translation Studies and Thai Theatre Studies. My research is therefore a pioneering attempt to compile all the scattered shreds of information about Shakespeare translation and performance in Thailand from these separate disciplines and from historical records.

It would certainly be incomplete to omit the first time Shakespeare was officially introduced into Siamese literary culture – during the peak period of widespread Western colonization and Siam's self-westernization. Also, it is indispensable to lay out the background of the country during this chaotic political period and to consider how this small nation managed to escape the threatening actions of the West and maintain her sovereignty. In contrast to China's and Japan's circumstances, Siam had never followed the policy of isolationism. The country, from the first time it made contact with the West, possibly during the Ayutthaya period (1351-1767), was always open to foreigners especially in trading and cultural exchange. In Siamese historical records, kings of Siam since the Ayutthaya period have always recruited Western foreigners to serve as noble consultants in their palaces. However, sharing a similar fate as her surrounding neighbours, Siam was also a prime target of Western colonization, particularly by Britain and France. Witnessing the victories of Britain and France over Burma, the Malay Peninsula, Indochina and, above all, their subsequent invasion into such powerful Asian nations as China – to which Siam had always looked up and with which it had very close relations, Siam was well aware of the inevitably

approaching danger of Western penetration. Under the lead of King Rama IV, widely known as King Mongkut⁵ (who reigned between 1851-1868), Siam decided to deal with both Britain and France by pursuing friendly diplomatic strategies. From 1875 to 1887, Siam became the subject of political conflicts between the rival British and French empires over these territories in Southeast Asia; however, throughout these conflicts, the country somehow managed to maintain her independence until the end of the colonization period in the early-twentieth century.

With the uncertainty of the nation's future during the period of political confusion, Siam went through a process of vigorous modernization and westernization. Western education became the stepping stone to national security as it seemed to be the only way to elevate the country to be equal to the West. Western education, without a doubt, began first among royal family members and court elites. These selected groups of the aristocracy were now fully exposed to Western cultures in terms of language, arts, philosophy, modern technology, and political science. Many of these 'young blood' elites were encouraged to pursue their education in Western countries, namely Britain, France, Germany, the United States and Russia, with a high aspiration that they would bring back Western knowledge to help develop their home country. Unsurprisingly, initiated by groups of Western-educated elites, Shakespeare was finally introduced to Siamese readers. Shakespeare arrived branded as 'high Western art'; therefore, he became a part of the 'regime of images' to enhance the impression of literary civilization in Siam to the West. More important, and perhaps the most crucial

⁵ This is the same King Mongkut whose name is widely known among Western audiences from the famous Broadway musical, *The King and I*.

factor, was that the person who played the most active role in making Shakespeare the most well-known Western literary figure in Siam was the most honoured and respected figure of the nation himself – the King of Siam.

King Vajiravudh and His Literary and Dramatic Activities

King Vajiravudh of Siam⁶ (who reigned between 1910-1925) was one of the most gifted figures in Siamese literary history, remembered as a prolific dramatist and all-round man of letters.⁷ He was the first Siamese King to have studied abroad. Educated in England since he was twelve years old in 1893, King Vajiravudh was exposed to and fully absorbed English culture, particularly English literature and English drama – the subjects of his genuine passion. The reign of King Vajiravudh was regarded by many Siamese scholars as a ‘golden age’ of modern Siamese Drama as he, after his return from England, became the most active figure in promoting modern Western drama to Siamese society.⁸

⁶ King Vajiravudh was the sixth monarch of Siam under the Chakri dynasty. The first son of King Chulalongkorn (or King Rama V) and Queen Saovabha, King Vajiravudh was born on 1 January 1881.

⁷ David Wyatt, ‘The King’s Mikado’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, 81.1 (Bangkok: The Siam Society under Royal Patronage, 1975), p. 133.

⁸ He started his education in the Royal Palace like all of his royal (half-) siblings learning from royal-appointed personal tutors who were both Siamese and Westerners. Western languages, particularly French and English, were among the most important subjects he was encouraged to learn from the time when he was very young. One of the most successful results of his study of the English language was his first translation of William S. Gilbert’s *Mikado* when he was ten years old. From the Siamese Royal Court, he continued his education in Britain at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 1893 and became part of the Durham Light Infantry Regiment upon graduation. Then, he went to Oxford University to study law and history at Christ Church in 1899. In 1894, while he was studying in England, his elder-half brother Crown Prince Vajirunahis died. Prince Vajiravudh, as the second eldest son (he was born to the third queen consort of King Chulalongkorn), was appointed the new Crown Prince of Siam on 8 March 1894 at the Royal Thai Embassy in London.



Figure 3 – King Vajiravudh of Siam (1881-1925)

As some young courtiers were bored with traditional dance drama, the crown prince founded a club called ‘Taweepanya Samosorn’ in his palace with a small theatre. This place became the place where young nobles gathered and pursued literary activities. The first play performed in this theatre was a spoken play called *Som Por Som Look* [*Like Father Like Son*] which the prince adapted from a Western play. He also directed and supervised the rehearsal by himself. The tickets were sold at a very cheap rate. Most of the audiences were his royal relatives and courtiers. The prince assured them that his play would be a lot more fun than ‘yee-ke’ performance (a popular form of Thai traditional dance drama seen by commoners outside the court).

It could be concluded that the prince supervised and directed his play in these following ways:

1. The form of Western spoken drama was taken. The plots were about social aspects and lives of middle-class people. The stories are about family

conflicts, morality, politics, love, married lives, loyalty, duty and responsibility etc. These main themes are focused on rather than the traditional theme about a prince and princess.

2. Modern drama divides the script into acts. The Western play ends within two hours and some plays are only one hour in length, while Siamese dance drama might last a day and must be performed each part.
3. Modern plays communicate messages of morality and nationalism, religion, history, arts and culture.
4. The King used Western acting techniques to train the actors; voice control, natural movement. He also used games to teach the actors to be able to improvise on stage, such as 'Dumb crambo'. He made the actors practise after dinner every day.
5. He used the Western process of directing starting from reading the script, interpreting the role, fixing the blocking, focusing on natural movement.
6. The King demonstrated by acting himself.
7. The play has a male and female cast. The actor and actress played in intimate scenes in which they touched each other's body or even kissed as Westerners do. Thus, the innovations shocked the audiences. For example, the King paired with his fiancée in a play called *Kon Taek* [*Destruction of the plan*] in 1919. Sometimes, the King took the role of a low-class character.

Not only was the King very active in practical theatre, he also experimented with different styles of literary writing as a distinctive author:

poetry, poetic prose, songs, and historical and social plays. According to historical records, the total collection of his plays – both original and translated works – consists of approximately 180 plays; 143 of which are written in Thai and 37 in English.⁹ In 1916, the name of Shakespeare became widely known in Siam as one of his plays, *The Merchant of Venice*, was translated by King Vajiravudh under the Thai title, *Venit Vanit*. A few years later, the King also translated three other Shakespeare plays – *Tam Jai Tan* [*As You Like It*] from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in 1921, *Romeo Lae Juliet* [*Romeo and Juliet*] from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in 1922 and an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* into a traditional form of Siamese dance drama entitled *Phraya Ratchawangsan* [*General Ratchawangsan*] in 1925.

King Vajiravudh was not the first translator in the country who showed his enthusiasm for translating Shakespeare's plays. In the Preface to the King's translation of *Venit Vanit* [*The Merchant of Venice*], he states that there had been earlier attempts to translate Shakespeare's plays by two other prolific poets of his time: Prince Narathipprapanpong, who translated *Romeo Lae Yuliet* from *Romeo and Juliet* between 1890-1893 and *Long Lai Dai Pleum* [*Enchanted*] from *The Comedy of Errors* in 1893; and Luang Thammapiban, who translated *Vinis Vanit Kham Chan* [*The Merchant of Vinis: The Poem*] from *The Merchant of Venice* in 1916.

Nevertheless, the King also declared that none of these early Shakespearean translations intended to keep the original format of Shakespeare's

⁹ 'Thai' has always been an official and native language of the country. We never call it 'Siamese' language as the language is part of the Tai-Kadai language family, which is widely spoken in the Southeast Asia.

texts; instead, all of them were based on Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*. *Romeo Lae Yuliet* by Prince Narathipprapanpong was an adaptation in the form of Thai traditional narrative tales. Similarly, the translation of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, also by Prince Narathipprapanpong, was simply a loose narration of Shakespeare's story, not a complete translation. Luang Thammapiban's *Vinis Vanit Kham Chan* [*The Merchant of Vinis: The Poem*] was in the form of a traditional Thai narrative poem not in playtext format.

The King's ultimate goal was to preserve Shakespeare's original format. So he opted to follow Shakespeare's style of presentation closely. Indeed, according to Pin Malakul, a former page to King Vajiravudh and later the Minister of Education (1957-1969), the King's translations are 'pure translation' as the King intended to maintain both the rhetorical style and poetic form of Shakespeare's original texts. Hence, the translation was done line by line using both Siamese traditional verse forms and prose following the style in the original text.

What is clear is that the King captured the essence and spirit of Shakespeare's plays and earned the most tremendous praise from the Siamese literary milieu. Prince Naris, another prominent Siamese playwright and poet, said of the King's translations that by reading the King's translated versions he '[knows] the true Shakespeare now.'¹⁰ King Vajiravudh clearly sets out, in the Preface of his first translation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (1916), his personal inspiration to translate Shakespeare:

¹⁰ Pin Malakula, 'Dramatic Achievement of King Rama VI', *Journal of Siam Society*, Vol. 63.2 (Bangkok: The Siam Society under Royal Patronage, July 1975), p. 263.

Considering that Shakespeare's plays have already been translated into most European languages, even in Japanese, I feel a bit ashamed for the fact that we have not yet had any translated texts (of Shakespeare's works) in Thai.¹¹

[My translation]

It was the King's intention to translate all these classic works into Thai for reading, as they had already been translated into many other languages.¹²

Aside from the King's ardent and genuine interest in Shakespeare's works, he found Shakespeare to be a significant part of a national-image-building project. Shakespeare, internationally recognized as an emblem of Englishness, became an expression of the ideological implication of Western civilization for those nations which translated his work. Thus, the image of Siam as an equally-civilized nation was to some extent represented through the existence of Shakespeare translations in the Thai language. In 'International Shakespeare', Anthony B. Dawson talks of Shakespeare as 'the greatest weapon in the arsenal of British high culture'; and says that 'cultural exchange' only goes one way so that 'nothing is returned to the cultures whose forms are appropriated for Western art'.¹³ In Siam, the superior iconic status of Shakespeare has been exploited to build an imagery façade for a small nation. Perhaps it can be viewed by foreign eyes as a self-delusion, but for

¹¹ Vajiravudh, King of Siam, *Venit Vanit [The Merchant of Venice]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thai Rom Klao, 1986), Preface.

¹² Vilawan Svetsreni, 'King Vajiravudh and the Thai spoken drama: his early plays in English and his original Thai lakho'n phut with special emphasis on his innovative uses of drama' (unpublished MA thesis, University of London, The School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991), p. 44.

¹³ Anthony B. Dawson, 'International Shakespeare', *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*, ed. by Stanley Wells and Sarah Stanton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 187.

Siamese people it was the crucial stepping stone and a new chapter in the country's development through the process of dynamic cultural assimilation. Shakespeare, after all, was a means of linking local Siamese and Western cultures.

The arrival of Shakespeare in Siam, as suggested earlier, was an outcome of an intense educational and literary westernization of the nation during the late nineteenth century. From his initial introduction among the group of Western-educated elites, Shakespeare was recognized as representative of 'high-class' Western classics. His name was acknowledged by Siamese literary readers as the greatest *kawi* [poet] of the Western civilization. But his fame as the world's greatest playwright seemed to be overlooked and was given less regard among Siamese readers. This may have had something to do with the fact that general Siamese readers and audiences before the twentieth century had no idea what a 'playwright' was. In Siamese traditional indigenous theatre, the job of playwright did not exist. For most Asian countries this was common; it can be found in many oriental traditional forms of theatre most of which belong to the same category: dance drama. Traditional theatre of Siam also appears in a form of dance drama in which dance, song and music are crucial to the theatricality while spoken dialogue plays a very insignificant role. A traditional Siamese 'playtext' was basically an extract from a narrative poem (which may have been written by an individual or a group of rhetorically-skilled poets). The poems in performance would be sung by narrator-singers accompanied by fine dance and music. So, in the local perception of Siamese audiences in the early twentieth century, a playwright was simply equivalent to a poet. Even King Vajiravudh himself refers to Shakespeare very often as a '*Jintakawi*' [a poet with great imagination] not a playwright.

Nowadays, the King's translations have become classics in the Thai Literature genre and are still widely read and studied in schools and universities. Some of them were officially put into the national curriculum in a compulsory reading list for Thai language and literature subjects. Many lines from his translations are frequently quoted and recited by Thais. Some of them have become adages (words with which most people are familiar without recognising their origin). Some parts of the translations were borrowed and adapted by song writers to make hit contemporary Thai pop songs. One of the most vivid examples is the King's translation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* – *Venit Vanit* in Thai. The lines quoted below are from the speech that Portia delivers in the Venetian courtroom scene:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd

It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

[Act 4, scene 1]

The King's close Thai translation is rendered:

The act of mercy will not come by anyone's force

It dropped like a pleasant rain from heaven above to earth¹⁴

[My translation]

These lines are among the most frequently quoted and most remembered by Thais. Thai children are taught to recite these lines by heart in schools. They are

¹⁴ Vajiravudh, *Venit Vanit* [*The Merchant of Venice*], p. 62.

also known by all Thai nurses as the lyric of the official national ‘Nurse Song’,¹⁵ commonly sung in every nursing school in Thailand.

It seems that Thai readers praise and enjoy the King’s translations more than they do to the original works of Shakespeare. One reason is, of course, the English language barrier. Although English has been a compulsory part of Thai education for decades, Thai people in general can neither speak nor read fundamental English well, let alone make sense out of Shakespeare’s sophisticated old English. Hence, they have to turn to translations when it comes to reading English classics. As a result, they sometimes ignore the fact that this is a translation not the original work. In some extreme case, the author’s original work is distorted, manipulated, or totally replaced by the popularity of the translation. So that, some translators enjoy public acceptance and popularity as if they themselves were the authors of the original texts. However, this may be partly true in a case of translator’s ‘invisibility’ defined by Lawrence Venuti:

[A] translated text [...] is judged acceptable [...] when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’.¹⁶

¹⁵ It is a very common practice in Thailand that every educational organization e.g. school, university, and even a department or a faculty in a university, has its own ‘official’ song(s) which is sung by members of the group especially when they get together for auspicious events arranged within their organizations. Every school and university in Thailand has its own official school ‘anthem’ which every student, former and current, remember the words by heart. The ‘anthem’ signifies that members of the group share the same spirit as if they are from the same family.

¹⁶ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 1.

According to Venuti, a translator's 'invisibility' occurs when the translation is rendered exceptionally well, making the text read fluently and smoothly as if it was originally written in the translated language. In such cases, the translated text reads so naturally that it appears to be original. This is especially true in the case of King Vajiravudh's translations of Shakespeare when, as the translator, he is regarded as an author himself. Some Thai readers sometimes mistakenly assume that the translated versions are the King's original pieces of writing. An example can be found in the next part of the aforementioned 'Nurse Song' lyric. After quoting the King's translation of 'The quality of mercy is not strain'd...' at the beginning of the song, the lyric goes:

This message was imparted from the Philosophical King¹⁷

to remind us all to always value and practise the act of mercy

Mercy is like rains [which drop] from sky to earth

[My translation]

At this point, it seems that King Vajiravudh becomes so 'visible' that he completely outshines Shakespeare.

¹⁷ 'Somdet Phra Maha Theerarajchao' which means 'Philosophical King' is the royal epithet which leading literary scholars in Thailand offered to honour King Vajiravudh for his outstanding contribution to Thai literature after his death in 1925



Figure 4 – The first edition of *Tam Jai Tan*, King Vajiravudh's translation of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

The huge popularity of the King's translations may have deterred later generations of translators from translating other works of Shakespeare, as they assume that no one will ever be able to produce anything as excellent as the King's translations. Another possible factor in discouraging new-generation translators from translating Shakespeare might lie in the impression that Thai readers regard Shakespeare as the greatest *kawi* (poet). In translating the works of the greatest *kawi*, the translator is being challenged to prove his own poetic and rhetorical ability. Chand Chirayu Rajani, another Thai literary scholar, reflects the Thai perspective on verse translation in his article 'On Translating Thai Poetry' by firmly declaring that verse should be translated into verse only.¹⁸ However, in translating English verse into Thai, Rajani does not clarify whether the translator

¹⁸ Chand Chirayu Rajani, *Facets of Thai Poetry* (Bangkok: The National Identity Board Office of the Prime Minister, 1983), p. 317.

should employ suitable Thai verse forms to translate English verse or opt to imitate the structure of English verse forms.

New generations of Thai writers and translators have grown away from the traditional style of writing. They are now more accustomed to prose than poetry. Also, there are so many types of Thai verse forms, most of which are distinctly subtle and sophisticated with many strict regulations and some conventional rules to follow. All of these factors are a huge barrier for modern translators who wish to translate Shakespeare. If they wish to follow the demonstration of King Vajiravudh, they are expected to translate Shakespeare in the style that the King does – in verse and prose. As a result, there have been only a small number of translators of Shakespeare in the twentieth century, and none of them has really made a name for themselves in translating the Bard. Shakespeare study and the practice of Shakespeare translation in Thailand are therefore still confined within a small circle of literary scholars and theatre practitioners, while being largely neglected by the Thai public.

Chapter II

An Analysis of King Vajiravudh's

Translations and Adaptations of Shakespeare

The strategies that King Vajiravudh applied in his Shakespeare translations are worth examining in detail as his translations have become role models for Thai translators in later generations. Thai Shakespeare translations, particularly the early products, made Shakespeare 'indigenous' rather than 'foreign'. To introduce Shakespeare to a wider public outside the superior educated circle requires an attempt by the translator to synthesize the 'foreign' with the 'local', in other words, to domesticate the text to suit the taste of the target readers. Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian and philosopher, points out that in literary translation the translator has to choose between 'sending the reader abroad' (foreignizing the text) or 'bringing the author back home' (domesticating the text).¹ King Vajiravudh chose the latter option. Since Western literature was strange to Siamese readers, most early Siamese translators choose to 'bring the author back home' and transform the foreign 'other' to the indigenous 'us'. The method was to make use of the existing conventional local forms – in Shakespeare's case, the Thai poetic form – as the key medium. Romy Heylen delineates the process of domestication and acculturation in *Translation, Poetics, and the Stage*:

¹ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 20.

Literary translation can, in fact, be seen as a creatively controlled process of acculturation, in that translators can take an original text and adapt it to a certain dominant poetics or ideology in the receiving culture.²

This domestication process may be seen to resemble the dressing of a doll. For most Thai girls, the best present we could ever dream of was a long-blond-haired, blue-crystal-eyed Barbie doll: a look that is obviously different from Thai. We all loved to dress our Barbie with beautiful clothes. However, sometimes we put our little Thai traditional costumes on them, gave them a Thai name and even pretended that they were our Thai best friend. At that point, we totally forgot that in reality none of our 'Thai' best friends would ever have blue eyes and blond hair. Like a Barbie, with a Thai name and Thai traditional attire, so the Bard was treated in the translation process. We dressed Shakespeare with our traditional costumes to forget that he was not one of 'us'. Thai traditional verse forms were the key to producing the illusion of 'Thai-ness' from Shakespeare. This practice helped bring Shakespeare much closer to the Thai readers as it, to some extent, eliminated a sense of 'foreign-ness'.

King Vajiravudh, like other Siamese translators of his period, translated Shakespeare by adopting a wide variety of Thai verse forms. In order to understand this process fully, it is important to begin by understanding the basic types of Thai verse that the King used in his Shakespeare translations.

² Romy Heylen, *Translation, Poetics, and the Stage: Six French Hamlets* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

Basic Thai Verse Types

Modern Thai readers would certainly agree that using prose as a medium in translation should be easier than using complex metrical verse forms. King Vajiravudh took a more challenging path by applying traditional Siamese poetic patterns in all his translations. The question of poetic forms and why they are highly regarded as a better choice in translation practice than prose can be explained by the Siamese concept of ‘pleasing’ sounds and by Siamese theatrical tradition.

Siamese society used to have an oral culture. Before the educational reforms in the early-twentieth century, most Siamese commoners could neither read nor write. In order to disseminate literary texts to the public, the process depended very much upon sound and upon verbal circulation. Poetry played a very important role. With its rhyme and special arrangement of words, people could easily remember the message. Siamese people in general, as a result, have inherited great admiration for anyone who speaks poetically.³

James N. Mosel points out that Thai poetry, with its form and sound, resembles music. Considering that Thais have ‘ears’ for melodious sounds, poets have to put a lot of effort into choosing words to produce impressive sounds.⁴ Such sounds, according to Mosel, are actually the outcome of a ‘rhyme-making’ or ‘poem-creating’ process. It is important to emphasize here that in the Thai context, rhyming is the most essential feature, ‘for nothing is poetry unless it

³ Phraya Anuman Rajadhon, *Kansuksa wannakhadi ngae wannasin* [*The Art of Literature Studies*], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Ratchabandittaya sathan, 1964), p. 10.

⁴ James N. Mosel, *Trends and structure in contemporary Thai poetry: with translations and bibliography*, Department of Far East Studies, Cornell University (New York: Ithaca, 1961), p. 3.

rhymes'.⁵ Thai use of rhyme is diverse and subtle. Most Thai forms involve a rigid rhyming pattern. Thai rhyming words, unlike English rhyme which is usually found at the end of a line, often appear within the same line or between lines rather than at the end, and sometimes the position in which they fall can vary. A study by Thomas J. Hudak, 'The Indigenization of Pali Meters in Thai poetry', illustrates that Thai classical literature including dramatic texts is generally written in the five classical verse forms; *khlóng*, *chan*, *kaap*, *klon*, and *raay*.⁶ However, in translating Shakespeare, King Vajiravudh mainly employs four different types of verse forms in his works namely *klon*, *khlóng*, *kaap* and *chan*.⁷ Although a few other verse types occasionally appear in the translations, they are not as common as these four verse forms.

Klon

This is the most frequently used verse form in Thai dramatic literature and in Thai Shakespeare translation; it is believed by many literary scholars and critics to be an indigenous verse form of the nation. Although there are various types of *klon*, what King Vajiravudh most often employed in Shakespeare translation is

⁵ Prince Bidyalankarana, 'The Pastime of Rhyme-making and Singing in Rural Siam', *The Siamese Theatre*, ed. by Mattani Rutnin (Bangkok, 1975), p. 183.

⁶ Thomas John Hudak, 'The Indigenization of Pali Meters in Thai Poetry', *Ohio University Monographs in International Studies Southeast Asia Series*, No. 7 (Ohio and Athens: Ohio University Centre for International Studies, 1990), p. 4.

⁷ In King Vajiravudh's translations of Shakespeare's plays, *raay* is rarely found in use. It is probably because this poetic pattern is usually used for a more specific purpose or specific occasion, for example to praise a new king or a new capital. *Raay* is probably the least structured of all Thai poetry. However, it is very difficult to compose as one has to be a master of Pali and Sanskrit (from which vocabularies are borrowed to provide a source of images and sounds that help make speech and poetry sound pleasing and sacred) to be able to write traditional *raay*. *Raay* also comes in various patterns.

klon 8 which contains eight syllables grouped together in a unit called a *wak*.

Four *wak* complete one stanza.⁸

OOOOOOO a	OO a OOOO b	
OOOOOOO b	OO b OOOO c	(stanza 1)
OOOOOOO d	OO d OOOO c	
OOOOOOO c	OO c OOOO e	(stanza 2)

Most of the King's translations rely heavily on the *klon* form as an equivalent to Shakespeare's use of blank verse. This is probably because *klon* has been the most widely used and is the most familiar Siamese verse form to Siamese readers. *Klon* is also the most common verse pattern used in other forms of entertainment. The enduring success of this verse form depends on its harmony with the nature of the Thai language. Owing to rhyming constraints, as found in most cases of poetry translations, the translated text tends to be expanded in terms of length when compared to the source text. Most translators struggle to find the right words in order to make perfect rhymes, resulting in employing more words than what appears in the original text. But this occurrence is rarely found in King Vajiravudh's translated versions. He proved his poetic talent by strictly maintaining the number of lines as in Shakespeare's text as well as strictly following metrical rules of the *klon* form.

⁸ Hudak, p. 14.

This example is taken from King Vajiravudh's *Tam Jai Tan* [*As You Like It*], Act 2 Scene 7. The following quotation is among the most memorable Shakespearean lines both in the English and Thai versions:

Bold = Thai Transliteration

Italic = My translation

<i>Original</i>	<i>Translation</i>
All the world's a stage	(a) Tung Lok Preap Muan Ronglakorn <u>Yai</u> <i>The whole word is like a big stage</i>
And all the men and women merely players:	(a) (b) Chai Ying <u>Sai</u> Preap Tualakorn <u>Nan</u> <i>Men and Women are like players</i>
They have their exits and their entrances;	(b) Tang Mee Yam Kao Ork Yoo Muank<u>an</u> <i>They all have their exits and entrances.</i>
And one man in his time plays many parts	(b) (c) Kon Nueng <u>Nan</u> Yom Len Tua N<u>ana</u> <i>One man can play many parts.</i>

Khlong

Khlong is the oldest form of Thai poetry. It is highly intellectual and is used only by the sophisticated and educated classes because of its elaborate tonal and rhyming constraints. It is usually employed for serious or philosophical themes. Besides the compulsory rhymes, there are also certain tonal restrictions. The rhyming pattern of *khlong* is shown below. The words in parentheses are optional.

OOOOO	O a (OO)
OOOO a	O b
OOOO a	OO (O O)
OOOO b	OOOO

Owing to its dominant form and complicated rhyme scheme, *khlong* is used in translations to highlight a particular ‘message’ in the original and give a hint to readers as to where they should pay special attention. For example, in King Vajiravudh’s *Venit Vanit* [*The Merchant of Venice*], Act 2 Scene 7, he applies *khlong* to translate the messages found in Portia’s three caskets where Shakespeare himself uses rhyming couplets. Therefore the important message can be distinguished from the normal *klon* form.

Bold = Thai Transliteration

Italic = My translation

<i>Original</i>	<i>Translation</i>
All that glisters is not gold—	(a) Wow Wow Borchai Neur Kam <u>Dee</u> Tua Na <i>All glitters are not always gold</i>
Often have you heard that told.	(a) (b) Pasit Yom Kei <u>Mee</u> Sop <u>Sod</u> <i>There are some proverbs that [we]have heard</i>
Many a man his life hath sold	(a) Bang Kon Wod Chi<u>yee</u> Lak Pleark Nork Na <i>Some men die in trade of the outside [good] look</i>
But my outside to behold. Glided tombs do worms enfold.	(b) Pai Nork See Rung <u>Rod</u> Tae Kang Nai Norn <i>Outside look brightly colourful but there are worms inside</i>

The most common type of *kaap* in Thai is *kaap yanii*. This has eleven syllables per line, divided into two separated groups of words of five and six syllables respectively. Four groups complete one stanza. *Kaap* contains less complicated pattern and tonal harmony. It is usually employed for heroic, martial, or laudatory themes and also for religious purposes as well as for narration.⁹

⁹ Hudak, p. 2.

OOOO a a OOO b
 OOOO b OOOOO c

In King Vajiravudh's translation, *kaap* is often employed to replace Shakespeare's songs, usually performed to a musical accompaniment. Shakespeare often uses songs to suggest a distinct order of reality in the world of the play. For instance, Orsino's love for Olivia in *Twelfth Night* is implied by the melancholy songs which Feste sings to him.¹⁰ In Siamese literary convention, *kaap* is traditionally used for writing song lyrics, especially the traditional Siamese boat songs. The following example of a song translation is taken from *Tam Jai Tan [As You Like It]*, Act 5 Scene 3, where two pages perform a lively love song to Touchstone and his girlfriend, Audrey. The translation is very close to the original and also gives a similar sense of lovers' liveliness generated through the rhythm of *kaap*.

Bold = Thai Transliteration

Italic = My translation

<i>Original</i>	<i>Translation</i>
It was a lover and his lass, With a hey, and a ho, and, a hey nonio,	(a) Chainoom kub Naree (Ha Hai) <i>A boy and a girl</i>

¹⁰ Leah Scragg, *Discovering Shakespeare's Meaning* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 3.

<p>That o'er the green cornfield did pass</p> <p>In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,</p> <p>When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding;</p> <p>Sweet lovers love the spring.</p>	<p>(a) (b)</p> <p><u>Tee</u> Ruam Rak Samuk <u>Som</u> (Hey) <i>who join love in harmony</i></p> <p>(b)</p> <p>Deun Plang Thang Chuan <u>Chom</u> (Ha Hai) <i>Take a walk and enjoy scenery</i></p> <p>(c)</p> <p>Salee Chum Cha-um <u>Sri</u> (Hey) <i>wheat fields look beautifully green</i></p> <p>(d)</p> <p>SaenNgam Yam Wasan (Ha Hai) <i>It is a lovely spring time</i></p> <p>(d) (c)</p> <p><u>Un</u> Pen Yam Na Yin<u>dee</u> (Hey) <i>Which is a pleasant time</i></p> <p>(c)</p> <p>Nok Rong Kong Pong <u>Pee</u> (Ha Hai) <i>Birds sing loudly in the forest</i></p> <p>(e)</p> <p>KooRak Ruen Chuen Wasun (Hey) <i>Lovers enjoys their time in the spring</i></p>
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It is interesting to note that one possible reason for the King to choose *kaap* to render Shakespeare's song here is the fact that, in the original text, there appear the words 'hey' and 'ho'. In Siamese traditional barge songs, the lyrics are always in *kaap* form. It is also a common practice to have a lead singer to sing the lines and a group of chorus to vocalise the tune after each line. When the lead singer finishes each line, the chorus will respond by singing the words 'Ha Hai' and 'Hey' alternately in a harmonious tune. This exceptional practice is not found in any other forms of Siamese songs than the barge songs; therefore, I believe that the King intentionally employs the barge song in this particular scene as he finds some similarity between the two cultures.

Chan

Chan verse is the most difficult and demanding metre in Thai poetry. It has always been very difficult for most Thais to read *chan*, let alone to write it. Although there are some 59 variations of *chan* forms in Thai literary practice, the most popular and widely used form is called *intharawichien chan*. *Chan* metre is extremely difficult to compose because of its rigorous rules regulating the sequences of two kinds of vowels, *kharu* (heavy vowels) and *lahu* (light vowels) which can only be heard when spoken. It also makes use of a large number of archaic words from Pali and Sanskrit, which are commonly used in religious texts, with the result that it has a sacredness conferred upon it.¹¹

In his translations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and *As You Like It*, King Vajiravudh occasionally used *intharawichien chan* to highlight important scenes or, sometimes, prominent dialogues. The following example is taken from

¹¹ Mosel, p. 105.

the famous ball scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1 Scene 5, when Romeo first meets Juliet at a ball held at the Capulet's residence. Romeo manages to steal a few moments to be alone with Juliet. In the Thai version, instead of using a normal *klon* verse, Romeo suddenly falls into *chan* in expressing his love to Juliet.

The rhyme pattern of *intharawichien chan* and the number of syllables in each line are exactly the same as the *kaap* pattern which has been illustrated earlier. Therefore, the rhyme pattern does not need to be illustrated here. The only difference is the use of *kharu* (heavy vowels) and *lahu* (light vowels) pattern which of course can only be heard and distinguished in Thai language.

Bold = Thai Transliteration

Italic = My translation

<i>Original</i>	<i>Translation</i>
If I profane with my unworthiest hand	Mae Ka La Lap Luang
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:	<i>Sorry that I intrude</i>
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready	Na Starn Warodom
stand	<i>Into your fine residence</i>
To smooth that rough touch with a	Duay Hut Ta Toi Chom
tender kiss.	<i>By the hand of mine</i>
	Rue Ko Bab Bo Mak Mee
	<i>With sins on it</i>
	To Oat Ta Preab Ma--
	<i>And the lips compare to those of</i>

	<p>Maka Koi Na Tee Nee</p> <p><i>A pilgrims, one of who is standing right here</i></p> <p>Kae Kit Cha Kalee</p> <p><i>Please undo my evil deed</i></p> <p>Tusa Duay Ja Chumpit</p> <p><i>With a kiss</i></p>
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As already mentioned above, the *chan* metre is extremely difficult to write owing to its strict regulation of using heavy and light vowels and Pali words. This example shows the different level of vocabulary uses. To Thai readers, most of the words in this example sound archaic and very poetic. King Vajiravudh probably uses the elegant *chan* form in this particular scene on purpose. In Shakespeare's original, Shakespeare employs a few religious terms such as 'holy', 'shrine', and 'pilgrim'. *Chan* and the use of Pali words can help build up a sense of sacredness as in the original text.

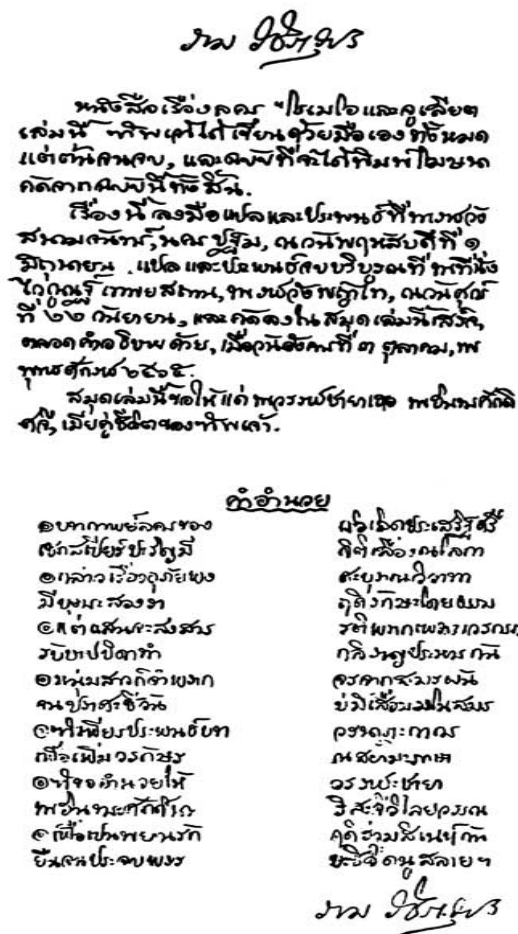


Figure 5 – King Vajiravudh’s preface (written in both prose and verse forms) in his own handwriting, to his translation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*,

Case Study: *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, King Vajiravudh’s Adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Othello*

Chronologically, prior to the three more faithful Shakespeare translations done by King Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan* – a dance drama script adapted from Shakespeare’s *Othello* – was the first of Shakespeare’s works to be translated by the King. He states clearly in the preface to *Phraya Ratchawangsan* that the writing was done in 1911, five years before his first publication of a

complete translation of Shakespeare's *Venit Vanit* [*The Merchant of Venice*]. However, *Phraya Ratchawangsan* was not published until 1925 despite the fact that it was popular and frequently staged in dance drama form during the King's lifetime.

According to Pin Malakula, a former royal page to King Vajiravudh and a renowned Thai educator (who specialised in King Vajiravudh's literary works), there are three versions of King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan*:

1. An original manuscript in the King's handwriting, in pencil
2. A revised version for stage performance also in the King's handwriting, in ink pen
3. A re-writing of *Phraya Ratchawangsan* in the form of a *se-pa* text version (as will be described in detail later in the chapter)

The King writes in the preface of *Phraya Ratchawangsan* (published in 1925) that he started this adaptation project at the request of a courtier, Chan Hoomprae (Kulap). The preface which the King writes in a form of *klon* verse says:

I have read this story
Of the great poet Shakespeare,
Which is called *Othello*.
And I really enjoyed his tale.
Nai Chan Kulap later beseeched me
To write this story in Thai dramatic style.
So I started writing it

on September 20.

Until 17 of October

Year one hundred and thirty¹²

The work, to my satisfaction, was finished.

I then polished the writing to make perfect *klon*.

This work is intended

To entertain Thai readers.

Had there been any inappropriateness in my writing,

I wish Thai literary scholars would forgive me.

[My translation]

Phraya Ratchawangsan is, however, not the first demonstration of the King's attempt to appropriate or adapt Western plays to fit Siamese dramatic tradition. He had done it a long time previously with the comic opera of W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan, *Mikado*, which he adapted into a musical play, 'Wang Ti'.¹³ In adapting Shakespeare's *Othello* to *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, resembling his earlier adaptation of *Mikado*, King Vajiravudh's 'relocalization' approach is important. He opted to make a liberal adaptation of Shakespeare's original text, believing perhaps that by changing the setting of the original play,

¹² The year indicated here is in the Thai calendar year which is equal to the year 1911 in the Western calendar.

¹³ King Vajiravudh was only 10 years old, when he was given an English translation lesson from his English tutor, Mr. Robert Morant, to translate some parts of *Mikado* into Thai. The King perhaps cherished the memory of his impression of the play and, a decade later after his return from his education in England, put his hand to the revision of his early translation of *Mikado*. This time he rewrote the story by re-titling, renaming all its characters and changing the setting of the play from Japan to an imaginary kingdom whose language use sounded very much like Chinese. In the preface of the play, King Vajiravudh has inserted an explanation for his adaptation decision and also all changes he made in the play with a hope that it would allow more theatrical flexibility in terms of settings, costumes, and interpretation when it was put on stage.

‘nothing would be lost.’¹⁴ More importantly, as the main purpose of his writing was to have the play performed as *lakhon nok* (the traditional popular form of dance drama), the King rewrote the story strictly in conformity with traditional Siamese dance drama playtexts.

In *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, the plot of Shakespeare’s *Othello* is followed closely, including the death scenes of the main characters Othello and Desdemona at the end. However, this is quite an unconventional practice in the Siamese literary tradition which always expects to end the play with joy and reconciliation. Instead of changing the ending to please his Siamese readers’ theatrical tastes, the King chose to keep the original tragic plot. As a result, his *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, even though it proved quite popular among local audiences, has never been staged as a whole play but only in extracts, some selecting ‘happy’ scenes. Owing to the Siamese theatre tradition, stage performances would be performed mostly on auspicious occasions such as a birthday, anniversary, or welcoming party, so that tragedies were considered inappropriate. In addition, there is a superstitious belief that the death of a king or a person of great stature on the stage would cause misfortune and calamity to the theatre and to the performers. Therefore Siamese theatre troupes would avoid staging plays with tragic endings.¹⁵

One may question why King Vajiravudh did not opt for one of the other comedies of Shakespeare in the first place or, if he intended to translate a tragedy,

¹⁴ David Wyatt, ‘The King’s Mikado’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, 81.1 (Bangkok: The Siam Society under Royal Patronage, 1975), p. 135.

¹⁵ Mattani Mojdara Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), p. 158.

why he did not begin with all-time favourite choices like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, or *King Lear*. Considering King Vajiravudh's dramatic background and his theatrical activities, it is undeniable that he had a profound knowledge of Siamese traditional theatre both as an audience member (who – as a prince – had seen a wide range of productions from the best troupes of the nation) and as a theatre practitioner himself. Similarly, while studying in England he was exposed to the English dramatic tradition as an enthusiastic theatregoer and as a practitioner. He might have been keen to share his theatre experiences in England with the Siamese. He may also have wanted to try his hand at assimilating those exotic foreign theatrical styles into Siamese theatre. For general Siamese audiences, especially in the past century, stage performance has been the source of pure entertainment not the path of self-enlightenment. The audience was accustomed to, and preferred, melodramatic love stories rather than serious philosophical and historical plays. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, despite their huge reputation in the West, were thought-provoking plays which could not be easily understood by the newly-westernized Siamese audience. *Othello*, though also a tragedy, portrays love stories and human follies committed in the cause of love.¹⁶ It was therefore more accessible to the Siamese audience. Moreover, a few famous stories in Siamese literature depict tragic love stories as well, for example, the stories of *Phra Lor*¹⁷ and *Laksanawong*¹⁸ end tragically with the death and separation of the ill-fated lovers. *Othello* therefore seemed a perfect choice for adaptation.

¹⁶ Svetsreni, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Phra Lor*'s story resembles Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as it is based on hatred between two families and ends with death of the heroes. It tells a story of two kingdoms which have a long-term conflict. Phra Lor a young prince of one kingdom falls in love with twin princesses of his enemy kingdom. When their love is exposed, they are all

Although King Vajiravudh was well-aware that the local audience could have a hard time familiarizing themselves with tragic-ending plays, he insisted on maintaining the plot of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Nevertheless, realizing that he might upset some of the audience, the King put an amusing remark in the epilogue of his *Phraya Ratchawangsan* asking his readers to open their minds for this unorthodox ending:

This is the end of my writing
 No continuous episode will be told
 In the future, if there is someone
 Getting irritated reading this story
 I beseech you not to put your hand [or add something]
 On my writing
 Nor implore help from the god Indra
 To sprinkle holy water to bring the dead back to life¹⁹
 This is my request

killed by the order of their vindictive grandmother at the end of the story. *Phra Lor* is considered one of the most well-known Thai literature and has been appreciated by Thai readers for all time. The writer is unknown but it is widely believed that it was written during the Ayuthaya era or around 1448-1483, long before Shakespeare was born.

¹⁸ *Laksanawong* is another sad love story. Prince Laksanawong mistakenly orders an execution of his beloved wife who appears to him in a disguise of a man. He is devastated to learn the truth at the end of the story.

¹⁹ Indra is the king of gods and the lord of heavens. In Siamese belief, Indra has super-power to bring back life from death. I am not so certain what the King exactly means by his reference of Indra here. Perhaps he means to tell some Siamese literary scholars who found the death final scene of *Phraya Ratchawangsan* unorthodox and unacceptable to Siamese dramatic convention that it is of no use to seek super-power from the god to bring back the life of the hero and heroine i.e. *Phraya Ratchawangsan* and *Bua Pan*. In traditional Siamese stories, it is a very common plot that when the hero was killed by the villain, the god Indra would always come down to earth and bring the hero back to life.

If anyone dares act against my will

I curse them to get choked on foods

And have nightmare when they go to bed²⁰

[My translation]

Phraya Ratchawangsan's characters and plot summary

Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> Original Characters	King Vajiravudh's <i>Phraya Ratchawangsan</i> Characters	Description for <i>Phraya Ratchawangsan</i> Characters
Othello	Phraya Ratchawangsan	The Indian-Malay General: a dark-skinned professional soldier who works as the head general for Somdet Phra Wigromratchasri (or Somdet Phra Wigrom), King of Sriwichai kingdom. Since he is a foreign soldier – regardless of his high-ranking status, he has to endure racial prejudice from other noble courtiers.
Desdemona	Bua Pan	Phraya Ratchawangsan's wife and daughter of Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod

²⁰ Malakula, 'Dramatic Achievement of King Rama VI', p. 104.

Iago	Muen Srisithikarn	Phraya Ratchawangsan's subordinate and Malai's husband. He vows to seek revenge from Phraya Ratchawangsan for promoting the younger soldier, Kuan, to the rank above him. He hides his evil nature under the veil of 'honesty'.
Emilia	Malai	Muen Srisithikarn's wife and Bua Pan's maidservant
Cassio	Kuan // Khun Kraiponpai	Phraya Ratchawangsan's lieutenant and adopted son.
Brabantio	Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod	A courtier serving in Somdet Phra Wigrom's court, and Bua Pan's father
Roderigo	Chote	Friend of Muen Srisithikarn who is jealous of Phraya Ratchawangsan because he is also in love with Bua Pan.
Duke of Venice	Somdet Phra Wigromratchasri	The King of Sriwichai kingdom

Plot summary

Somdet Phra Wigrom of Sriwichai is planning to send his Head General (Phraya Ratchawangsan) to suppress the Malay pirates in the Malaka gulf. The king promises to reward Phraya Ratchawangsan by assigning him the job of ruler of the Malaka Island if the mission is accomplished. Phraya Ratchawangsan is in love with Bua Pan and tries to seek approval for her hand in marriage from her noble father Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod. Furiously, Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod rejects this wedding proposal due to the fact that Phraya Ratchawangsan is much older than Bua Pan and is an Indian-Malay, a foreigner of dark-skinned race. Very much disappointed by the refusal, Phraya Ratchawangsan asks his adopted son and a lieutenant, Kuan, to bring Bua Pan to him. Bua Pan, who reciprocates his love, agrees to elope with him one night. Muen Srisithikarn, a soldier who is under the command of Phraya Ratchawangsan, is angry with his General for promoting Kuan to be Khun Kraiponpai – the position above his rank. He knows all about the elopement plan from his wife, Malai, who is Bua Pan's maidservant. Muen Srisithikarn then convinces Chote (his friend who also falls in love with Bua Pan) to disclose the lovers' plan. Chote visits Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod at night and tells him that Bua Pan has now run off with Phraya Ratchawangsan. Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod is enraged so he seeks fair judgment from his king (Somdet Phra Wigrom) by accusing Phraya Ratchawangsan of seducing his daughter by the power of black magic. Phraya Ratchawangsan and Bua Pan are called to the king's court and they both insist that they are truly in love. The king, with the intention in mind to send Phraya Ratchawangsan to defend his southern border, suggests reconciliation between Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod and the newly-wedded

couple. Phra Sriarkra-ratchayod, without any other options, unwillingly agrees. After that night, Phraya Ratchawangsan goes off to the sea battle and finally wins over the Malay pirates. He then goes further, to Malaka Island, to have his victory celebration. Muen Srisithikarn and Chote take this celebratory opportunity to get Khun Kraiponpai (or Kuan) drunk until he ends up in a fight. Phraya Ratchawangsan is so disappointed with his trusted adopted son that he strips Khun Kraiponpai of his rank for a punishment. Muen Srisithikarn again plots another evil plan to convince Phraya Ratchawangsan that Khun Kraiponpai and Bua Pan are having affair. The plan is successful. Enraged and devastated, Phraya Ratchawangsan kills his wife Bua Pan only to learn the truth later that his wife is innocent and that he has fallen into an evil trap. Feeling guilty and heart-broken, Phraya Ratchawangsan commits suicide. Muen Srisithikarn's evil acts are exposed and he is sent into custody for punishment.

Staging *Phraya Ratchawangsan* in the Siamese dance drama style

When King Vajiravudh decided to stage his *Phraya Ratchawangsan* in *lakhon nok*, a popular form of Siamese traditional dance drama, he found the need to revise his first draft to suit the actual staging. The revised version was mainly done in the organization of the play, not in the language. The revised script was divided into four episodes to stage:

Episode 1: Phraya Ratchawangsan and Bua Pan elope together up to the scene that Somdet Phra Wigrom (Duke of Venice) suggests reconciliation between Bua Pan's father and Phraya Ratchawangsan (the King finished his revision on 30 November 1913).

Episode 2: The second part is from the departure of Phraya Ratchawangsan from Sriwichai City to fight the pirates up to the celebration of his victory at Malaka Island (the King finished his revision on 2 December 1913).

Episode 3: Muen Srisithikarn (Iago) plots his revenge by convincing Phraya Ratchawangsan that Bua Pan is committing adultery with Khun Krai (Cassio)

Episode 4: Phraya Ratchawangsan is called to the court to the final scene when Phraya Ratchawangsan commits suicide

Because of the constraint imposed by traditional belief in staging death scenes, episodes three and four (which present the tragic scenes) have never been staged. Only the first two episodes of the play were staged and received a very good response from the Siamese audience. According to the historical records, these selected scenes were frequently performed on many different auspicious occasions. Pin Malakula lists some of the dates and occasions on which the play was staged and the places where it was staged:

February 1912: Staged by the royal theatre troupe at Sanam Chan Palace.

February 1913: Staged by the royal theatre troupe on the celebration of Buddha images, Sanam Chan Palace.

November 1914: Staged on the occasion of the 60th birthday celebration of Chao Chom Pae.

October 1920: Staged on the occasion of a welcoming celebration for the Royal Navy.

July 1922: Staged on the occasion of the 60th birthday celebration of Chao Phraya Yommarat at Saladaeng.

March 1923: Staged on the occasion of the birthday celebration of the King's queen consort.

April 1924: Staged on the occasion of the New Year celebration of the King's queen consort.²¹

When King Vajiravudh finished his revision of episodes one and two, he found that each episode was still too long to be put on stage so he deleted some scenes and replaced them with narrative verses for singing, and spoken dialogue, to save stage time. Not only did he cut some scenes, he added more words in other scenes to make the story more lucid. For example, in the scene that Somdet Phra Wigrom (Duke of Venice) is sitting among his Sirwichai courtiers, in the original version the King illustrates the scene when Somdet Phra Wigrom (Duke of Venice)

Sits on the throne in the royal hall

Surrounded by his noble courtiers.

[My translation]

In the original version, it does not provide information about the minor characters nor identify each courtier character. In the revised version, King Vajiravudh adds:

All gracious noble courtiers

Show their respect to the king.

²¹ Pin Malakula, *Ngaan Lakhon Khong Phrabaat Somdet Phra Ramathibodee Srisintara Mahavajiravudh Phra Mongkutklao Chao Paendin Siam [Introduction to the Dramatic Activities of His Majesty King Vajiravudh]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thaiwattanaphanit, 1996), p. 106.

On the left hand side is Chao Phraya Chakri
Who is the Minister of Civil Interior.
Chao Phraya Mahasena
The Minister of Defence sits on the right
Other lower ranking nobles
Are all presenting themselves in the hall.

[My translation]

The reason that King Vajiravudh added some details of these minor characters is, perhaps, to try to write the passage in conformity with the Siamese conventional literary style (with its focus on the narrative description of the settings, appearance of the characters, and the costumes).²²

Another version of *Phraya Ratchawangsan* is in the form of a *se-pa* singing script. *Se-pa* is a primitive form of Siamese traditional story-telling which is regarded as the origin of all sorts of classical performances both folk and court; sometimes it is described as poetry reading (or in fact, poetry singing). To make the narration interesting, the singer – who mostly performs solo – will sing in accompany with the beat of a *krab* (small hand-held, beaten, wooden instrument). In *se-pa* performance, the singer may sing separate pieces of verse taken from well-known Siamese literature, or sometimes sing to narrate the whole story. The singing can be combined with a dance movement, yet this is optional.²³ The

²² See more explanation on the topic ‘*Phraya Ratchawangsan* following the convention of Siamese dance drama’, below.

²³ The court of King Rama III and V brought in a full classical band and dancers to visualise *se-pa* narration. This became *se-pa ram* (dancing *se-pa*) or *lakhon se-pa* (*se-pa* drama). There were two types of *se-pa ram*, standard and comical *se-pa*. The former

aesthetic value of *se-pa* lies in the stories and the way they are narrated as much as the singer's vocal skill and his emotional improvisation. Dusadee Swangviboonpong, a well-trained Thai classical singer and skillful musician, describes the function of *se-pa* singing by explaining that in traditional performance, *se-pa* is often categorized as a recitation rather than a song even though it might sound like the latter to Westerners. However, the melody of *se-pa* is more or less unfixed yet within the melodic outline. This is because *se-pa* is a 'textful' vocalisation so the melody can be changed in order that the audience will get the meaning of a word more easily; while following a melodic outline, there is a definite feeling of metre, relating to the reading aloud of poetry.²⁴

King Vajiravudh allowed the publication of the *se-pa* version of *Phraya Ratchawangsan* in April 1925 and dedicated it to his queen consort Suwatthana. This *se-pa* script of *Phraya Ratchawangsan* is shorter than the dance drama script. There are some insertions of traditional songs which make the script more suitable for *se-pa* performance. *Se-pa Phraya Ratchawangsan* was frequently performed by a solo-singer on private royal occasions, for example, in royal banquets.²⁵

was polite and well scripted and the latter was humorous. *Khun Chang-Khun Pan*, the story of a hero and a warrior, was one of the most popular *se-pa* performed in court.

²⁴ Dusadee Swangviboonpong, *Thai classical singing: its history, musical characteristics and transmission* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. xix-1.

²⁵ King Vajiravudh states specifically that he also liked to have it performed when he was having his haircut, (Malakula, *Introduction to the Dramatic Activities of His Majesty King Vajiravudh*, p. 107).

***Phraya Ratchawangsan* following the convention of Siamese dance drama**

To understand the adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* into traditional Siamese dance drama style, some background knowledge of Siamese dance drama needs to be established.

Lakorn nok is a traditional form of popular dance drama in Siam. It has evolved from the dance drama tradition in the Siamese Court with more comedy and less refined dance movements to suit a commoner-audience's aesthetic taste. Forms of popular theatre vary from country to country but most share one dominant quality: a response to indigenous norms. Gary Carkin notes that:

[T]he popular theatre genre, to be popular, must have contained within itself, symbols which mesh, or 'fit', with prevailing norms of action (symbolic action) and concepts of right behaviour inherent within a particular society. That such symbols do exist and are related to subsequent patterns of behaviour deemed acceptable by a group which emphasizes with them as they are condensed, heightened, and clarified in theatre [...].²⁶

The script writing tradition of Siamese dance drama is also a product of conformity with Siamese theatrical norms of action. It has its own pattern and style. The study of the history of Siamese classical dance drama scripts and its conventions is, however, difficult due to the fact that the arts of script writing originated from an oral tradition with no written records. Most popularly-staged stories were narrative folk-tales which were told in different versions by means of

²⁶ Gary Bryden Carkin, 'Likay: The Thai Popular Theatre Form and Its Function within Thai Society' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1984), p. 218.

improvisation; in addition, its so-called ‘play script’ – if one existed – was memorized and handed down through generations by oral transmission from the old to the young or from teachers to students. The written texts, which are seen and studied today, are the court versions, most of which were written by court elites. There is almost no record of scripts written outside the royal court.

Siamese drama is heavily based upon dance categories; this is why this form of theatre is called ‘*lakhon ram*’ (*lakhon* means drama, *ram* means dance). Just as in its Indian theatre origin, the elements of music, dance, poetry, and story-telling – prominent in the Indian theatre – are salient characteristics in the dance drama of Siam.²⁷ While the core of Western drama is, perhaps, the realistic acting of a written play script, Siamese drama focuses more on the medium or form of the play, i.e. the dance movement, accompanied with music and narrative songs. Play scripts, as in the Western understanding in which characters take turn to speak their lines, never existed in Siam. For Siamese people, literature and drama are almost synonymous. Verse written for the drama, however, had some special characteristics which marked it out as different from ordinary verse found in literature meant to be read for pleasure, although both used the same type of verse form. Dramatic verse paid more attention to movement possibility and to conformity with song and music.²⁸ Aside from using different introductory terms at the beginning of each stanza, each foot may flexibly contain 6-8 syllables. For

²⁷ Patraboon Wattasombat, ‘The Dance Drama of Thailand’ (unpublished MA thesis, California State University, 1981), p. 35.

²⁸ Hudak, p. 131.

normal verse, 8 syllables for one foot is considered the goal that the poet needed to achieve.²⁹

In writing a dance drama script, it is not common to group separate scenes into acts as in the Western manner. The whole story is narrated continuously in the style of tale-telling without a break. Some distinctive characteristics that mark out dramatic literature in Siam from other common verse literatures are listed below:

Introductory word use

At the beginning of some stanzas, to introduce a new scene or a new character, two terms are generally used to signify the status of character. The term '*mua nan*' ['at that moment'] is used to introduce the main characters, most of whom are of royal or other high rank status, while the term '*bat nan*' ['then'] is used to introduce a minor character of low rank, someone less important, or a commoner. The terms can be used also when there are several characters in the scene and they converse with each other. In these cases, the terms help in giving a clue to the readers and audience as to who is now speaking. It is important to note that ordinary verse literature does not begin each stanza with these two specific terms. It is one of the distinctive rules found only in dramatic writing. The following examples are excerpts from King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* to demonstrate how the terms are properly used in dance drama text:

²⁹ Hudak, p. 140.

A.

เมื่อนั้นพญาราชวังสัน กลั่นกล้า

เป็นทหารเลื่องชื่อลือชา ในแคว้นอาณาจักรวิชัย

แต่เดิมเป็นแขกแปลกเพศ เข้ามาสู่เขตรกรุงใหญ่

มีจิตรสามิภักดิ์รักไทย น้ำใจซื่อตรงจงรัก³⁰At that momentCourageous Phraya Ratchawangsan

A renowned honorable soldier

in Sriwichai kingdom

He is a foreign Indian

who came to this kingdom

With loyalty and love for Thailand

he serves the country with his honesty.

[My translation]

B.

บัดนั้นนางมาลัย เหลียวดูน่าหลัง

แล้วพูดว่าฟ้าผีลึน่าชัง กระไรคลั่งงวยงหลงผู้ชาย

พญาราชวังสันนั้นก็แก้ จะคราวพ่อคราวแม่ของโฉมฉาย

ที่หนุ่มๆ ชุ่มชวยสำรวกาย แม่บัวผันไม่หมายมุ่งใจรัก³¹

³⁰ Vajiravudh, King of Siam, *Phraya Ratchawangsan* [*General Ratchawangsan*], Thai Texts, Printed on the occasion of Queen Suwatana birthday (Bangkok, 1925), p. 1.

Then

Malai takes a quick look [to make sure nobody is around]

And says [to Bua Pan] what ashamed

That you are so crazy about this man

Phraya Ratchawangsan is so old

The same age of your parents

There are lots of young charming gentlemen out there

But you just don't fall for them.

[My translation]

As seen from these examples, when the main character (hero, heroine or royalty) is mentioned, the term *mua nan* [at that moment] is used at the beginning of the stanza, followed by the name of the character in reference. In example A, Phraya Ratchawangsan, although not a royalty character but the hero with high ranking status, is introduced by the word *mua nan*. In a similar vein, example B shows that when Malai (*Othello*'s Emilia) – Bua Pan's maidservant – is mentioned, the term *bat nan* [then] is adopted to show that she is a lower rank or minor character. Apart from these two common terms – *mua nan* and *bat nan* – other terms or phrases can also be found, though less frequently, to introduce new scenes or new characters in a more neutral manner. Some phrases used are, for

³¹ Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, p. 4.

example, *ma cha klao bot pai* [now let us talk about (followed by the name of character)].

Types of *Bot* (passages of narration) in Siamese dance drama scripts

A Siamese dance drama script is in a storytelling form which includes passages of narration and, perhaps, a few dialogue parts. These passages of narration, written in verse form, are sung by a group of singers off stage to narrate the story accompanied by background music. Sometimes, the scripts are referred to as songs or lyrics. Conventionally, good playwrights (or ‘poets’ in the Siamese perception) can demonstrate their mastery in rhetoric not only through their choice of poetic words but also by including various types of narrative passages in their writing. Swangviboonpong provides a detailed explanation of categories of narrative passage generally found in Siamese dramatic texts. He divides the passages into 11 categories by the subject of the song: General Songs, Love Songs, Songs of Sorrow, Hymns to Beauty, Songs of Parting, Song of Rage, Patriotic Songs, Songs of Moral Instruction, Martial songs, Songs of Praise and Songs of Goodwill.³² Each different type of song is used in a different narrative scene. For instance, in a fighting or battle scene, Martial songs will be used. As there are a large number of songs in this each category, the decision on which particular song is used for particular scene is totally dependent on the playwright or the music director of the production. In examining King Vajiravudh’s *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, some significant and interesting types are demonstrated here.

³² Swangviboonpong, pp. 49-57.

A. *Love scene and love-making scene*

The narrative passage of the love scene in Siamese dramatic literature has a unique way of expression. A love scene, including a love-making scene, forms a big part in every single piece of Siamese dramatic literature. These scenes are regarded as the most enjoyable for local readers and audiences. In dance drama, the love scene is regarded as one of the most salient scenes so that the dancers who play the hero and the heroine have to be trained properly to be able to portray the perfect dance movement for the flirting and courting ritual. Usually the Siamese love scene begins with the secret meeting of the hero and the heroine in a private place. The hero may start wooing the heroine by showering her with compliments on her beauty and later confessing his love and desire for her. The heroine, however, cannot immediately show her contentment nor indicate that she reciprocates his love. She has to make a fake complaint, perhaps by accusing the hero of dishonouring her by telling her a lie. The hero, then, will respond to show that he is emotionally hurt by her act of distrust. He may swear to die in front of her if she does not return his love. The heroine now comes to the appropriate point to give her consent to their marriage. King Vajiravudh in writing *Phraya Ratchawangsan* follows this courting pattern strictly. The following example is an excerpt from a long love scene between Phraya Ratchawangsan and Bua Pan when Phraya Ratchawangsan is flattering Bua Pan on her physical beauty:

โฉมเฉลา

ยงเยาว์เยี่ยมยอดจอดจิต

พี่รักโฉมตรู่คู่ชีวิต

ขอชิดชมเนียงเคียงนาง

พี่เป็นทหารชาญศึก

ท่องเที่ยวทะเลลึกใหญ่กว้าง

หญิงอื่นหมิ่นพันอันสำอางค์ ไม่เห็นร่างเท่าทันกัลยา
 ถึงงามโอษฐ์งามแก้มแย้มยิ้ม จะงามพริ้มพร้อมสรรพนั้นสุดหา
 ฟังจะพบบัวผันขวัญตา งามท่วงกายไม่มีทรม
 ตัวพื้มีบุญล้น จึงได้ชิดนฤมิตอดสาม
 ขอแต่ให้ได้โลมโฉมงาม จะเป็นสุขทุกยามนาที่ ³³

My beloved the most perfect girl,
 I truly love you and want to be your life partner.
 I am a skillful navy warrior who has travelled around this vast ocean
 And seen thousands of fine-looking ladies, none of them is comparable
 to you
 With this lovely smile I cannot find from anyone else
 As I have now met you [I can say that] you are absolutely flawless
 I must have done lots of good deeds to deserve you who are the finest
 Making love with you will bring me eternal bliss

[My translation]

Following this courting practice is the love-making scene which is a description of the main characters' sexual activity. However, it is very common and regarded as tasteful for this scene to be delineated in a metaphorical style. This use of figurative language and metaphorical comparisons somehow suggests ambiguity even for native readers, not to mention the non-native Thais.

³³ Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, p. 7.

Swangviboonpong writes about such Thai dance drama love-making scenes as follows: '[I]t is no surprise to find that present-day audiences are unable to make [sense out of] this metaphorical comparison unless the context is given.'³⁴ *Bot Ussajan* or the 'making-love' narrative passage in Thai dance drama texts is full of traditional implications and symbols such as the images of insect and flower symbolising man and woman; storm and rain signifying sexual action. To demonstrate the idea, here is an example of a love-making scene taken from one of the most well-known classical Thai love-making songs *Phra Atit Ching Duang* [*The sun covers the moon*]:

พระอาทิตย์ชิงดวงพระจันทร์เด่น	ดาวกระเด็นไกลเดือนดาราดับ
หิ่งห้อยพร้อยไม้ไผ่ระยิบ	แมลงทับท่องเที่ยวสะเทือนดง

The sun covers the moon	The stars hide their faces,
The fireflies in the trees make them appear to rise and fall,	
Small <i>thab</i> insects overlay the earth, making the jungle tremble. ³⁵	

The above message, to non-native readers, might sound like a description of nature in poetic style. But it is not. Traditionally, this is quite an explicit love-making description if the reader can decode its hidden meaning via the metaphorical images. A love-making scene for the main characters, with a similar

³⁴ Swangviboonpong, p. 50.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

metaphorical narration, is also found in King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan*. King Vajiravudh narrates:

ว่าพลาทางแอบแนบสนิท	จุมพิตหอมรื่นชื่นนาสา
ลมรำเพยเผยกลิ่นสุมาลา	มากลัวกลิ่นวนิดายาใจ
เรื่อยเรื่อยกุ่มรินบินว่อน	เกลือกเกสรบัวทองพ่องใส
รื่นรื่นรสสุคนธ์ปนไป	สองใจจ่อจิตรสนิทนอน ³⁶

[Phraya Ratchawangsan] speaks and then approaches [Bua Pan]

Kiss her and smell her delightful fragrance.

Soft breeze brings on flower scent

Which smells like my beloved [Bua Pan].

An insect flies all over the place

Roll itself over golden lotus's pollen

With delicate scent [of the flower]

Two hearts bond, lying side by side on a bed.

[My translation]

In staging the love-making scene in Siamese dance drama, the dancers playing male and female characters will perform the courting dance movements in their sitting position on a big bench set in the centre of the stage. Once they reach the love-making passage, both dancers will perform the *wai* gesture – the

³⁶ Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, p. 9.

traditional greeting gesture by putting hands together above their heads – to be a sign of the end of their sexual activity. In modern productions, instead of using only dance gestures, changes in lighting are made – dimming the stage lights. The background music in a love-making scene is considered one of the most difficult and highly regarded songs as Thais traditionally believe that human sexual activity signifies a sacred bond between man and woman.³⁷

B. *Moral Instruction or preaching scene*

In every single piece of Siamese dance drama literature, a scene of moral instruction or preaching is a compulsory part of the play. It shows national attitudes towards life, morality and cultural norms. The common practice of this scene is, as the name suggests, that the wise senior characters give a teaching on moral conduct to the younger characters. Some of the most well-known moral instruction examples are *Pali Sorn Nong* [Pali preaching to his younger brothers] – an important scene in *Ramakein* (the Thai version of the Indian *Ramayana*); *Krisana Sorn Nong* [Krisana preaching to her younger sister] – based on a part from the Sanskrit epic *Mahabharata* when Princess Draupadi (sometime called Krishnaa) who married five sons of the Pandavas, teaches her sister about being a good wife. In *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, the preaching scene is found when Phraya Ratchawangsan teaches his adopted son Kwan (*Othello*'s Cassio) how to behave properly as a noble soldier.

³⁷ Somthawin Wisetsombat, *Wannakadeekarnlakorn [Dramatic Literature]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Uksarasartbundit Publishing, 1982), p. 151.

ลูกเอ๋ยเจ้าเคยได้เคียงชิด	รู้จักตบปฏิบัติใจข้า
ถ้าแม่เจ้ารักบิดา	จงอุตส่าห์ประพฤติให้ดั่งงาม
ทำการให้มีชื่อไว้	ให้เกียรติเกริกแคว้นแดนสาม
จงระวังอย่าคบกับคนทราม	มันจะลามลวนพาชะล่าไป
คบมิตรสนิทไมตรี	เลือกแต่ที่สุจริตไว้จิตรได้
ระวังคนปากหวานพ้อลานใจ	มันจะพาลูกให้ระยำยับ
หวั่นประจบคบบากปากคารม	พอเรารู้แล้วมันช่วยฟันสับ
การงานใดใดจะบังคับ	ใช้สติกำกับตริตrong
คนเรารู้มีวาสนา	มักมีคนอุศยาคอยหาช่อง
แม้ว่าทำพลาดนิดผิดทำนอง	มันสมปองเตะคว่ำคะมาไป
อย่ามัวคิดหาสุขแต่ส่วนตน	หมั่นคิดถึงประชาชนน้อยใหญ่
เจ้าจงรักษาตนไว้	ให้เป็นตัวอย่างในทางดี ³⁸

My dear son, you have always been by my side

And served me attentively.

If you love me

You must maintain your well-behaved character.

Work hard to save your name.

Make your name renowned widely.

Don't make friend with vicious people

As they will lead you to delinquency.

³⁸ Quoted in Malakula, *Introduction to the Dramatic Activities of His Majesty King Vajiravudh*, p. 107.

When it comes to choose a friend,
Befriend only men with honesty.
Beware of those who speak pleasant words
As they could lead you to destruction
And the one who always showers you with flattery
Could turn out to be one who destroy you when you fall
When encountering hard tasks
Be mindful and think them thorough
We are in a high-ranking position,
There are always ones who wait
To see us make even a tiny mistake.
When we fall, they will crush us down.
Don't do things for your own contentment.
But always think of people in majority.
Maintain your equitable character,
For being a good model [to those below us].

[My translation]

C. *Bathing and Dressing scene*

Bot Long Song (the bathing passage) and *Bot Song Khruang* (the dressing passage) are other unmissable parts in Thai dramatic literature. These combine to depict the scene, as the titles suggest, in which a hero or a heroine is having a bath, putting on make-up and getting dressed. It may sound odd to Western dramatic perception to include such an ostensibly insignificant scene which,

apparently, has nothing to do with the plot progression. The bathing and dressing scene, however, is a lucid display of how Thai people place their cultural value on beauty and external-appearance. Beauty is highly cherished by Thais as a blessed reward of good deeds. This concept is an influence of Buddhist belief that those who have done good deeds from their previous lives will be blessed and reborn with a fine-looking appearance. This cultural norm can be found in all aspects of Thai culture especially in Thai literature and drama. In Thai dance drama, for example, there is a type of special dance commonly known as *Chui-Chai* dance which is totally dedicated to praising the beautiful appearance of the dancer. This special dance is principally performed in the scene that the main character disguises or transforms him/herself (mostly by magical power) into a new beautiful figure. Faubion Bowers describes this special dance as follows: ‘It is a kind of showing off to indicate vanity and satisfaction with newly acquired beauty. The character admires himself, voluptuously calls attention to his costume, and points out the various aspects of his physical charms.’³⁹

Bathing and dressing scenes are also a salient reflection of the beauty-cherishment concept as in this scene the focus is put on describing the beautiful outfits worn by the main character. King Vajiravudh’s *Phraya Ratchawangsan* also includes this scene when Phraya Ratchawangsan is getting dressed in order to go out for the battle:

³⁹ Faubion Bowers, *Theatre in the East: A Survey of Asian Dance and Drama* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1956), p. 151.

ชำระสระสนานสำราญรื่น	ชุ่มชื่นสรรพางค์เย็นฉ่ำ
น้ำอบชะโลมทาซำ	แป้งร่ำลูบไล้ทั่วกาย
กางเกงเชิงปักก้านแย่ง	นุ่งยกพื้นแดงเจ็ดฉาย
เสื้อเข็มขาม่วงพรรณราย	ผูกเกราะลงลายเลขยันต์
ใส่สังวาลย์ประจำศรีสวัสดิ์	คาดเข็มขัดเหน็บกริชแข็งขัน
ประคดแพรหนามขุนาคาดพัน	ทรงประภาศเครื่องอันทรงงามอน ⁴⁰

[Phraya Ratchawangsan] pleasantly takes a bath

Which makes his body cool and fresh.

[After bathing] he puts on cologne

And fragrant powder all over his body.

[Then he] slips into his finely embroidered trousers

And wrap over with a shiny red cloth.

Wear a dark purple shirt.

And put on his armor with has sacred tattoo marked on the outer layer.

Wear his finest shoulder lace

and strap on his belt and put a dagger on.

Then tighten it up with an embroidered cloth

Now he looks exceptionally fine in his full costume.

[My translation]

⁴⁰ Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, p. 32.

D. *Sorrowful journey scene*

Another essential scene in Thai dramatic literature is the sorrowful journey scene. Swangviboonpong explained that this does not always have to mean a long or difficult journey; actually, merely a walk around a garden can also be regarded as a sorrowful journey. The key point is that this scene expresses the hero's forlorn thought of his beloved heroine as he has to depart from her on a journey. The sorrowful journey scene is an important opportunity for the poet to exercise mastery of rhetoric through a rich use of figurative language. In King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, this scene is found in the passage that Phraya Ratchawangsan leaves his wife Bua Pan on his battle journey.

ลมดีก็ใช้ใบเฉื่อย	นาวาแล่นเรือไม่ผันผวน
ขุนพลออกฝ่าเวร่าร้อน	เศร้าอุระสะท้อนถอนใจ
เรือเรือยลมพัดมาจากฝั่ง	เหลียวหลังจิตสั่นผ่นไฟ
หอมกลิ่นบุหงามาไกล	ไม่เหมือนเหมือนกลิ่นอรไทยชាយ
ยามค่าย่าสนทยาเย็น	โสมเด่นแสงระยับจับเวหา
นวลเดือนเหมือนนวลวนิดา	ผุดผ่องโสภายิ่งกว่าเดือน
ดาราเหมือนตานางแซลุ่ม	ใสแจ่มไม่มีที่ไหนเหมือน
อนิจจานาวามาต่างเรือน	ลอยเลื่อนห่างรักหักใจ ⁴¹

As the wind blows well, the sails are raised up.

The ship moves forward in a fine speed.

⁴¹ Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, p. 33.

The General [i.e. Phraya Ratchawangsan] is restless with his vehement desire [for his beloved].

He sighs deeply with the weight of sorrow he bears in his heart.

Wind blows the ship off-shore.

His heart is shaken with worries.

From far away, he can smell fragrance of flowers,

Which is incomparable to the sweet scent of his wife.

The night is approaching;

The moon is shining in the sky.

It shines brightly as [Bua Pan's] fair skin glows.

Twinkling stars resemble her eyes,

Which, alike, are beautifully sparkling.

Alas, the ship has brought [Phraya Ratchawangsan] far from home.

Far apart from his beloved one.

[My translation]

Analysis of King Vajiravudh's adaptation of *Othello*

The above excerpts from *Phraya Ratchawangsan* demonstrate how King Vajiravudh completely transforms Shakespeare's *Othello* into indigenous Siamese dramatic literature, leaving almost no trace of its original version. Narrated through the conventional form of Siamese dramatic literature combined with the flawless rhetorical and poetic ability of the adaptor-author King Vajiravudh, one may not realize that this originally comes from a Western play. However, there is one small trace of evidence that gives native readers a clue that this piece of dance

drama is not an indigenous Siamese story; the trace is reflected through its representation of dramatic philosophy.

Siamese dramatic philosophy is based on the belief that drama is a pure source of entertainment. The purpose of the dance drama is ‘to soothe, not stimulate’.⁴² Siamese drama thus relies more on forms – graceful dance movement, extravagant outfits, well-played music and vibrant settings – rather than on the themes and on the plot of the story. Big parts of traditional play scripts, therefore, are dedicated to the descriptions of beauties – surrounding nature, costumes, and the main character’s appearance. As all plays were a retelling of familiar local folk tales, the Siamese audience, especially in King Vajiravudh time, came to the theatre with full knowledge of the whole story. What they looked for from the drama, therefore, was not the excitement or surprise of a new plot; nor were they keen on observing character development. Siamese audiences, by watching old plays that they knew well, according to Wattasombat, needed to be ‘emotionally comforted by poetic justice in the resolution of the play which they cannot find in real life [as] it is the satisfaction of the mind [...] knowing that eventually good will righteously conquers evil and the conclusion will always be happy.’⁴³ What the Siamese audience looked for from a theatre, was pure joy in seeing good-looking dancers in elegant costumes perform graceful dance movements they might also well-remember.

The audience coming to the theatre knowing the entire story before hand is common in the West as well, particularly when it comes to dramatic classics like those of Shakespeare. Some Western audiences, by coming to the theatre for a

⁴² Wattasombat, p. 54.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 53-4.

famous old play, remember almost every word of the play by heart. Hence, the plot is not there to surprise. The enjoyments of seeing well-known plays lie in new interpretation, new stylization, new presentation and perhaps new messages from the different perspectives of each particular production. This is perhaps one of the main reasons why Shakespeare has been staged enthusiastically for four hundred years and has remained popular today. The Siamese audience, on the other hand, though also coming to the theatre knowing the story, does not expect to be amazed by new interpretations or new stage stylization. On the contrary, they expect to see the exact copy of the dramatic pattern they have seen and been impressed by. They yearn to see the exact same dance movements even though they are performed by different dancer-actors. The best dancer-actors in traditional dance drama, therefore, are those who prove themselves the best-replica of their dance-masters.

In terms of dramatic philosophy, Western drama provides a true reflection of human reality and encourages audiences to look deeply into their own lives. It portrays men and their struggles through both external and internal conflicts. Western plays, especially tragedies, always convey meaningful messages from which the audience could learn and keep pondering about once they have left the theatre. In short, Western drama is not only for pure entertainment but also challenges audience to think deeply and critically about a particular matter.

Siamese dramatic philosophy aims not to enlighten the audience but rather to entertain. Nevertheless, King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, behind the façade of the conventional form of Siamese dance drama, represents the essence of Western dramatic philosophy. As the King strictly follows Shakespeare's

Othello plot, the key message from Shakespeare is still preserved in *Phraya Ratchawangsan*. Perhaps the simple but crucial message is that the lives of good people do not always have a happy ending. With a Western perspective based on realistic ideology, the hero, despite all his good deeds and rightful conduct, may not always win over any obstacle and be saved from dangers. This is an outrageous idea for a Buddhist Siamese audience who strongly believes in the laws of Karma. For a Siamese audience, the fact that a virtuous wife Bua Pan (Desdemona) is misunderstood, accused and murdered by her envious husband without any chance to prove her innocence, is too cruel to stage and even intolerable to witness. The message, although indisputably true in real life, may not well suit a Siamese audience's need for fantasy and emotional comfort.

Another obvious example of the Western philosophy preserved in King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* is the idea of racial discrimination. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, racism is a central theme of the play as it is where all conflicts originate from. In Siam, however, racial discrimination has never been a problematic or controversial issue due to the fact that Siam is not really a multi-ethnic country. There are not many differences, either in terms of the population's races or their native languages. In traditional Siamese drama, the similar plot that the hero is a foreigner serving a Siamese king in a Siamese court never exists. Thus, the local audience has probably never thought about racism as a cause of social conflict before. Nevertheless, King Vajiravudh maintains the main plot of Shakespeare's *Othello* by creating his Phraya Ratchawangsan [*Othello*] an Indian-Malay who experiences racial discrimination from other courtiers. It is interesting to note here that in *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, the focus of characters' conflict based

on the ethnic race of the hero is shifted directly to his skin colour, which does not conform to the concept of ‘Beauty’ in the Siamese sense. In other words, the weight of conflict is put more on Phraya Ratchawangsan’s appearance and his skin colour rather than his ethnic race (which is not quite an issue in the Siamese context). These following excerpts from the play will help to clarify this point:

A. This following excerpt is part of the scene in which Chote (Roderigo), who falls in love with Bua Pan (Desdemona), shows his anger when he knows that Bua Pan has eloped with Phraya Ratchawangsan.

ลูกผู้มีตระกูลพูนยศ	ช่างชั่วช้าสาหัสน่าอดสู
ให้อ้ายด่าปล้ำเล่นไม่เอ็นดู	อ้ายชาติหมาชาติหมาหน้าอัปรีช ⁴⁴

For the lady from a prestigious family,
 It was a shame for what she has done.
 To give her consent [of sexual conduct] to **the black man**,
 That **ugly-faced** animal.

[My translation]

B. This scene is a passage in which Phra Sri, Bua Pan’s father, furiously accuses Phraya Ratchawangsan of using black magic to enchant his daughter for the elopement.

⁴⁴ Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, p. 10.

บัดนั้น

พระศรีขัดใจดังไฟผลาญ

[...]

อันว่าเจ้าแขกแปลกเพศ

มิใช่ผู้วิเศษล่องหน

พญาแขกก็คนภูก็คน

ใครจะเป็นเบี้ยบนมาลองดู

หน้าดำมีหน้าซ้ำใจคด

ทำอุบายสอดสูล

ทำเสน่ห์ให้ลวงลูกกู

โฉมตรูจึงตามมันมา ⁴⁵

Then

Phra Sri is burnt with anger

[...]

You, the foreign Indian,

are not a magician who can perform a vanishing trick.

You and I are both true men

Let's see who is going to win [in this war between us]

Not only black face, you also have crooked heart.

You have disgraced me,

By alluring my child with your magic.

My beautiful daughter then eloped with you.

[My translation]

To sum up, both Western and Eastern styles of dramatic tradition are unique. While Westerners put their social value on the importance of speech as

⁴⁵ Vajiravudh, *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, p. 18.

seen from their love of words reflected through their dramatic style, Siamese prefer the non-verbal form of communication and consider themselves more of a visual culture. For Siamese dance drama, not imitating realistic gesture and putting focus more on superficial stylization than content does not mean that Siamese drama does not pay attention to reflecting the truth of people's lives. On the contrary, through conventional form, format, dramatic language, and movements – Siamese finds its own way to reflect life and represent social values. King Vajiravudh's *Phraya Ratchawangsan* is an explicit demonstration of how Siamese manage to find the way to represent and assimilate Western philosophy through the native dramatic form. It is, in a way, a sign of acceptance and interest in dramatic culture of the West and is a significant stepping-stone for Siamese theatre development in the later decades.

Part Two

Staging Shakespeare in Thailand

Chapter III

Shakespeare in the Dichotomy of Thai Theatre

In the previous chapters, the main focus has been on translating Shakespeare's plays as literary texts and on the process of domesticating and transforming Shakespeare in conformity to Thai literary convention; however, the theatrical practices of Shakespeare's plays in Thailand have not yet been completely investigated. In chapters I and II, the history of Shakespeare's introduction and some translation strategies were delineated in detail. In brief, Shakespeare was introduced to Siamese readers and audiences in the reign of King Vajiravudh (1910-1925), by none other than the Western-educated King Vajiravudh himself who took a keen interest in literature and drama. His translations (adaptations) of three plays by Shakespeare, namely *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It* and *The Merchant of Venice*, are widely studied and occasionally staged in schools and universities for educational purposes or by amateur theatre groups for charitable occasions. There are some younger generation translators who have translated other works of Shakespeare: for example *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Twelfth Night*. Most of these finished translations – some for reading and some for staging in school productions – have not been published but, rather, have been circulated in private circles of scholars in universities. Only over the past two decades or so have there been more attempts by modern theatre practitioners to stage Shakespeare. This chapter aims to delineate the subject of staging Shakespeare in the Siamese court tradition from the late-nineteenth century,

which was the beginning of the influence of Western theatrical style on Thai dramatic culture. Also, the idea of the dichotomous set in Thai dramatic culture in which Shakespeare has been positioned is discussed in this chapter.

Shakespearean productions in the Siamese court tradition (1910-1930)

One of the most difficult tasks for documentary research is to find written records providing evidence of productions. With a country like Siam, which is not a literacy-based culture and with a low level of reading in the community, the difficulty seems doubled. Before the educational reformation in the early twentieth century, it was hard to find someone who could read and write outside the court and central city area. Most records, in the forms of inscriptions, chronicles, laws, decrees, or literature, noted theatrical performances were found only in the court. Records on the subject of the performing arts are no exception. Most of the written evidence, of course, was written by court members about the court's performing tradition. Popular performances would be described or mentioned only when they were part of public celebrations during state religious festivals. So the attempt to find historical evidence of Shakespearean productions in the Siamese court thus has to rely on scant sources, and it is quite impossible that Shakespeare productions could be found to have been staged outside the court theatre due to the fact that most people who enjoyed Shakespeare's plays were definitely confined within the upper-class elite. Emphasized by the fact that Shakespeare was introduced to the Siamese literary circle by the central figure of the nation, the King of Siam, early productions of Shakespeare in Siam were, without a doubt, limited within the court tradition.

The earliest written record shows that the first of Shakespeare's plays ever staged in Siam was *The Merchant of Venice* in the court of King Chulalongkorn in 1897. At that time a group of court elites, consisting of Western-educated royal family members and court civil servants, staged a scene from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in which Shylock and Portia negotiated in the court of Venice over the life of Antonio. This scene was unofficially named in Thai, the 'flesh slicing scene'. The staging was arranged on the celebrated occasion of King Chulalongkorn's return to Siam after his royal visit to Europe.¹ It is also possible, however without certain proof, that the director of the production was the Crown Prince Vajiravudh who later ascended to the throne as King Vajiravudh of Siam.

Another record of Shakespearean production in the Siamese court was during King Vajiravudh's reign. As mentioned earlier, King Vajiravudh wrote and translated a large numbers of play scripts both in traditional and Western styles. Some particular scripts appear in more than one finished version. It is estimated that there are about 183 recorded play scripts. The King's role as a dramatist dominated the court drama direction during his reign. He was also an actor-director of his own productions from page to stage. When he finished writing or translating a script, the King would normally have his royal pages read it out loud for him at his dining table or after his dinner. He would also be in charge of the casting process – assigning the actor for each role himself. And during the

¹ Sumonmarn Nimnetipan, *Karn Lakhon Thai [Thai Drama]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thaiwattanipanit, 1989), p. 59.

rehearsal, the King also worked closely with the actors as production director and stage director.

Yet even though King Vajiravudh gained highly respected status and reputation, in both local and international literary circles, as the most vital literary figure and dramatist who promoted Shakespeare in Siam, the record shows that he never staged a complete Shakespeare production in his court during his reign. Nevertheless, a few historical records show his attempt to stage a production of *The Merchant of Venice* based on his own translation, *Venit Vanit*, during the late years of his reign. The King's directorial notes, written in his own handwriting, show that the King paid very careful attention in every detail to staging the play. There are details of costumes for each character including the number of costumes needed for each character, stage props and stage settings, including the time required for changing the scene settings. He also made decisions in casting by appointing actors who would play each character and including a name list of the understudy for each role.² The production, however, was never put on stage. Without any certain evidence and clear reasons, it is believed that the production was cancelled due to the major flood which attacked the country that year resulting in a long-term economic crisis later in his reign.

Even though no complete Shakespearean production was ever staged in King Vajiravudh's court, the King's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*, in the

² The Committee Board of Vajiravudhanusorn Library (eds.), *Encyclopedia of King Vajiravudh Volunm II*, Thai Texts, Published on the occasion of the 100 years birthday anniversary of King Vajiravudh on 1 January 1981 (Bangkok, 1981), p. 559.

form of traditional dance drama, was frequently staged. *Phraya Ratchawangsan*, as it was entitled in Thai, was the first Shakespeare adaptation King Vajiravudh ever worked on and he finished it in 1911 before he started translating three other complete plays of Shakespeare. According to the historical record, the King adapted Shakespeare's *Othello* into two different versions – the dance drama script version and the *se-pa* text version.³ *Phraya Ratchawangsan* in the traditional form of dance drama was popularly staged and was very well received by the Siamese audience. However, due to the superstitious belief in Siamese theatre tradition that a play which ends with the suicide and death of tragic heroes should never be completely staged, only some 'happy' scenes from the play were selected to be staged on many auspicious state occasions.⁴

In brief, even though Shakespeare eventually found his way into the Siamese court in the early-twentieth century, his plays were considered very foreign and the Shakespearean dramatic style was hardly appreciated by the local audience, including the court elites themselves, unless the plays had been put through a complex and extensive adaptation process to suit native dramatic traditions and taste. These adaptation and acculturation processes leave Shakespeare appearing more alien to his own race but less alien in the target culture. Nevertheless, the introduction and demonstration of new different plots and story lines in Shakespeare's plays led to the beginning of a massive development and transformation of Siamese theatre in the later period. When

³ See Chapter II, pp. 79-82

⁴ See Chapter II, pp. 80-1.

traditional theatre was more open to Western theatrical styles, Shakespeare could appear more in his own style and the local audience gradually learned to appreciate his true character.

Shakespeare on the Elizabethan and Jacobean Stage: the popular tradition

Shakespeare during his lifetime belonged to the popular, public theatre. He started his career as a player and a playwright simply to earn a living from the newly born commercial show business in the Elizabethan period. According to Neilson & Thorndike, Shakespeare deserves to be regarded as a genius in the sense that he found, in the Elizabethan stage, the opportunity for his literary talent to be displayed and was keen enough in ‘gauging the immediate theatrical demand and in meeting the varying conditions of a highly competitive profession’.⁵ His playscripts were thus designed primarily to entertain theatregoers from different social classes and backgrounds, not for intellectual or educational reading. Like his fellow playwrights of the period, he often borrowed plots and stories from all kinds of narrative sources: Greek classics, Italian novels, current pamphlets, Latin histories, or English chronicles. Nonetheless, his very choice of stories might be mainly dependent on the current theatrical taste of his time.⁶ For more than two

⁵ William Allan Neilson and Ashley Horace Thorndike, *The Facts about Shakespeare* (New York: Neilson & Thorndike, 1913), p. 91.

⁶ Neilson and Thorndike, p. 91.

decades as a professional playwright, he would always ‘strive to please’ the public audience to survive in this business.⁷

Popular theatre and popular aesthetics are aspects of popular culture.⁸ These three terms are closely linked to each other. The term ‘popular culture’ is sometime replaced by other different terms such as ‘mass culture’, ‘public culture’, or even ‘plebeian culture’. According to Peter Jackson, the term carries with it the sense of its literal meaning – ‘belonging to the people’ – to its implication of ‘widely favoured’ or ‘well-liked.’⁹ In the meantime, as suggested by Burgess and Gold, when the term is associated with taste and aesthetics ideology, it somehow implies the sense of vulgarity, triviality, and baseness, which most likely belong to commoners. These qualities are the common distinction between elite and popular cultures.¹⁰ Chambers contrasts ‘elite culture’ with ‘popular culture’ by pointing out that the former, since it demands cultivated tastes and formally imparted knowledge, is more likely to be preserved in art galleries, museums, and university courses; whereas the latter is more incidental, transitory, and expendable, not separated from daily life.¹¹ His observation is endorsed by Jackson that elite culture requires effort, concentration, and high technical competence, disrupting the continuum of everyday life and

⁷ Wells, *Shakespeare for All Time*, p. 171.

⁸ Leggatt, p. 32.

⁹ Peter A. Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 76.

¹⁰ Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*, p. 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

encouraging recollection.¹² John Storey, in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: an Introduction* adds that when society has decided what high culture is, popular culture is simply seen as a 'left over'. In brief, popular culture and the popular audience comprise the majority of society; their arts are more likely to be considered lower in quality than those of the privileged elite.¹³

Popular culture occurs uniquely in a particular place and time and possesses the nature of constant change. It means that what is considered popular in one culture is not necessarily popular in other places with different socio-cultural contexts. In a similar vein, within one cultural system what is considered popular in one period of time is not necessarily regarded as popular in a different period. Part of the phenomenon depends on the changing taste and aesthetic perspectives of the public audience in different contexts of time and place. The term 'aesthetic' here is mostly used in a loose and broad sense to mean human perception and a sense of 'the beautiful' which of course varies depending on people's perceptions in different societies. What has vital impact on the changes of popular aesthetics in one culture may vary, but in most cases it comes from the socio-political policy of each period.

According to Storey, Shakespeare is obviously an exceptional case in the way that his works have been proved to be able to straddle the boundary of elite

¹² Ibid., p. 77.

¹³ John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: an Introduction* (Harlow: Prentice Hall, 2001), p. 6.

and popular cultures.¹⁴ From being the playwright ‘striving to please [a] popular audience’,¹⁵ Shakespeare’s status has gradually been shaped, through a long period of time, from a playwright of the commoners to a playwright of privilege. However, his plays are still popularly staged around the globe and capable of attracting a popular audience. Storey’s observation might be proved to be true in Western theatrical contexts or even on an international level, but in the case of Thailand, the assumption that Shakespeare’s plays possess a distinctive quality to cross the boundary between high and low cultures is highly dubious.

The Dichotomy of Theatre and Dramatic Aesthetics

The idea of dichotomy of theatre appears in both English and Thai cultures. In the past, it was more apparent that people were distinctively separated from each other and belonged to different social classes which could be conveniently divided into two main groups – the high and the low. Theatrical activities, were manifestly influenced by each individual social context, and could also be divided into two broad groups depending on the social-class of the creators: ‘high class’ and ‘low class’ forms. Sometimes these two forms were referred to by other, different terms such as ‘larger’ and ‘smaller’, ‘great’ and ‘little’, or ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ traditions. Whatever terms are used, it shows that the idea of a dichotomy of traditions has existed in all kinds of performing arts in

¹⁴ Storey, p. 7.

¹⁵ Even though it is likely that Shakespeare’s plays, in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, were also performed at Court (for the elite) – as well as at the Blackfriars theatre (for the middle-class audiences), Shakespeare’s role as the playwright seemed to part of popular rather than elite theatre.

almost every culture. Dichotomy ideology in theatre suggests distinctive characteristics of these two dramatic traditions in terms of players, venues, audiences, dramatic tastes, and theatrical conventions.

David Mayer and Kenneth Richards in their article 'Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre' has defined popular drama as 'that drama produced by and offered for the enjoyment or edification of the largest combinations of groupings possible within that society.' Mayer also suggests that even 'the educated, moneyed, aristocratic and professional classes' can also be clienteles of popular theatre but they are likely to come with an awareness that the performance may not be able to fulfil their sophisticated dramatic tastes. Mayer proposes some criteria for distinguishing 'popular' and 'aesthetic' (elite) drama by asking some questions as follows:

Does the piece give the indiscriminating spectator 'what he wants' at the expense of meeting the tastes and predilections of an educated class? Is the dramatic plot embellished with actions and displays offered as much for their own effect as for their relevance to the plot? Does the piece reassure the audience in the validity of traditional values and in the continuity of belief rather than reinterpret traditional attitudes, accepted facts, or mythologies?¹⁶

In England, before the birth of commercial theatre in the late-sixteenth century, the distinction between the two theatrical cultures was apparent. Michael

¹⁶ David Mayer and Kenneth Richards, 'Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre', in *Western Popular Theatre*, (1977), [Quoted in Leggatt, p. 28].

Hattaway in *Elizabethan Popular Theatre* describes two basic categories of performances by professionals: performances indoors for the privileged (for example a great hall in the court where players were summoned to entertain their aristocratic employers) and outdoor performances (at places of popular resort or recreation such as in the streets, market-places, fairgrounds or bear-baiting arenas).¹⁷ Despite these distinctively different venues, the dramatic presentation and stylization of the two is similar. In other words, it is most likely that the court saw the same plays the commoners saw in the public playhouses.¹⁸ According to Hattaway, the limited historical records from the Elizabethan period show that

a large number of the productions there were of romances or romantic treatments of historical or classical legends. When we turn to the lost plays from the popular playhouses, [...], we find a preponderance of romance or romanticized history confirming our hypothesis that the plays offered there were broadly similar in kind.¹⁹

From this aspect, it is quite obvious that, in a Western definition, the term ‘popular’ does not necessarily imply a particular social class but rather a kind of taste. It seems also that the division of the performing arts into high and low forms had ceased to exist in the West, or had become less significant since the founding

¹⁷ Michael Hattaway, *Elizabethan Popular Theatre: Plays in Performance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 16.

¹⁸ ‘English Renaissance theatre’, Wikipedia website,
< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_Renaissance_theatre > [accessed 3 January 2010], para. 6.

¹⁹ Hattaway, p. 16.

of permanent commercial theatres in the Elizabethan period where the two traditions began to merge together. The central (London) venue became possible, according to Andrew Gurr, when circumstances, including the stability of a good income and audiences consistent in both attendance and taste, met.²⁰ In public theatres, a mixed audience was usual. Alexander Leggatt in *Jacobean Public Theatre* mentions that from the seventeenth century onwards the educated and aristocratic spectator could share the public theatre with the commoner; however, Leggatt adds, they have to leave some of their expectations behind when they enter the playhouse.²¹ Even though the two traditions are not easy to disentangle, Peter Burke notes that the two traditions 'did not correspond symmetrically to the two main social groups, the elite and the common people. The elite participated in the little tradition, but the common people did not participate in the great tradition.'²² What Burke observes could be more valid in the Elizabethan period when it seemed impossible for a commoner to get an access to the great tradition, for example masques and masque-like features in regular plays which intended to appeal to extremely limited high-class audiences in the court. However this notion, perhaps, is not completely valid in the present day as, reinforced by the power of advance technological mass media and globalization, the distinctive line between the two groups is becoming increasingly blurred.

²⁰ Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 23.

²¹ Leggatt, p. 28.

²² Quoted in Leggatt, p. 32.

There is a different situation in the Thai theatrical context in which the dichotomy ideology is still widely recognized and practised. The distinctive division between high and low art forms still plays a significant role in classifying groups of Thai audiences. Certainly, to some extent, aesthetic sense is an individual artistic preference which varies from person to person. Hence, an audience straddling across the boundary of high and low is very possible. Of course, there must be a commoner who only looks for a few laughs from crude slapstick jokes in a predictable easy-to-follow play and an intellectual who cannot stand vulgarity at all and seeks for intricate verbal conceits and sophisticated plots. There must also be a member of the elite who may love simple entertaining jigs and a commoner who has a taste for a stylish entertainment that can inspire or intellectualise him. However, it is important to restate here that the term popular theatre or popular drama in this study does not exclusively refer to the lower orders of society but is used in a sense that the dramatic works are created and written to respond to the demand of the majority of audience who frequently attend dramatic activities. In other words, the term is used to suggest a type of performance which is audience-centred and has the capability to capture the public's attention. Leggatt perhaps gives the best definition of popular drama when he writes that 'these are plays whose chief function is not to express an artist's personal vision but to cater to the needs and tastes of an audience; they are a consumer product, part of a commercial enterprise.'²³ This thesis uses Leggatt's

²³ Leggatt, p. 2.

definition when it comes to analyzing Thai popular theatre and popular audiences' aesthetics.

The Dichotomy of Thai Theatre and Dramatic Aesthetics

The idea of the dichotomy of Thai theatre is commonly found in Thai Performing Arts studies. Michael Smithies begins his study of *Likay* – a popular traditional performing art – by clarifying the division of 'high class' and 'low class' forms of Thai dance drama.²⁴ Gary Bryden Carkin also refers to the 'larger' and 'smaller' traditions in his study of forms and functions of Thai popular theatre. He distinguishes the two by pointing out that the 'larger tradition', since it stemmed from the *Natyasastra* – high-class Indian classical dance – was confined to the aristocratic circle, while 'the smaller tradition' belonged to commoners and was seen to manifest itself in the use of colloquial language, free movement, and popular music and dance.²⁵ Jiraporn Witayasakpan, who studied the process and development of Thai theatre and the transformation of Thai aesthetic concepts during the mid-twentieth century, develops the ideas of an aesthetic dichotomy of Thai theatre by suggesting that a single, absolute theatrical tradition has never existed in Thailand. In her opinion, there has always been a dichotomy in the Thai theatrical tradition from which Thai dramatic aesthetics are shaped and

²⁴ Michael Smithies, 'Likay: A note on the origin, form, and Future of Siamese folk opera', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 59 01 03 (1971), p. 33. For a more detailed discussion of *Likay*, see Chapter IX, pp. 270-82.

²⁵ Gary Bryden Carkin, 'Likay: The Thai Popular Theatre Form and Its Function within Thai Society' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1984), p. 147.

developed.²⁶ Witayasakpan proposes three dichotomous aesthetic sets which are found relevant to Thai theatrical development: 'court' versus 'popular', 'urban' versus 'rural', and 'centre' versus 'periphery'.

For over eight centuries, until 1932, Thailand (or Siam as it was called by then) was ruled by an absolute monarchy. Siamese kings and their courts were the centre of state power and maintained hegemonic leadership. Theatrical tradition in this long period of time had been shaped into a clear division of 'court' and 'popular' traditions. As suggested by the names, the 'court' tradition was practised to entertain a small number of privileged aristocrats within the court, while the 'popular' tradition was, of course, practised by the majority of people outside the court. Not only was the Siamese court the centre of state administration, it was also the centre of artistic creation of all kinds and became the role model for the 'smaller' tradition to learn from and imitate. The more distant the people were from the court, the less likely their dramatic arts were to be considered artistic. Court theatre was regarded as a refined and elaborate art form, while popular theatre outside the court, though it somehow adapted some dramatic elements from the court, was considered coarse and vulgar by its nature of improvisation. Hence, popular theatre was generally ignored, or looked down on, by the court artists as an unsophisticated art form.²⁷ However, the interactions between court and popular theatres were definitely not always a one way street

²⁶ Jiraporn Witayasakpan, 'Nationalism and the Transformation of Aesthetic Concepts: Theatre in Thailand during the Phibun Period', (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1992), p. 17.

²⁷ Smithies, p. 33.

from the high to the low. There is sufficient historical evidence to prove that sometimes the high culture also borrowed theatrical techniques from the low, to make their performance less dull and less formal. The two forms, despite the distinctive boundary line separating them, had constant interactions and reciprocal exchanges in terms of theatrical elements in order to develop their own artistic stylization.²⁸

In the late-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the ‘court’ versus ‘popular’ dichotomous set was replaced by a new set of ‘urban’ versus ‘rural’ dichotomy. This new form of theatre dichotomy came with the major political change of the nation in 1932 when the absolute monarchy was overthrown and became, instead, a constitutional monarchy. This political change brought an expansion of trade, economic growth and the emergence of an urban middle class. In terms of theatre, economic expansion gave birth to a new form of commercial theatre with the keen support of urban middle-class audience who lived in the urban area of Bangkok and its vicinity. This new group, called the ‘newly-rich’, could afford to live a high-class Western lifestyle. They looked for new, exciting theatrical experiences, different from the traditional theatre, to please their modern tastes – in spite of the fact that they might not have had profound knowledge or understanding of Western dramatic arts. The theatres themselves, in response to the changing demands of the audiences, sought new theatrical techniques and Western-style presentation to satisfy their customers. The significant role of court

²⁸ Witayasakpan, p. 25.

theatre as the centre of Siamese performing arts ceased to exist. The commercial urban theatres became a new 'larger' tradition while traditional dance drama was still in favour among rural audiences and practiced outside the urban area.

The last dichotomous set, as proposed by Witayasakpan, is what she calls the 'centre' versus 'periphery' dichotomy.²⁹ Witayasakpan invents this term to describe Thai theatre and aesthetic transformations specifically during the Phibun period (1938-1944 and 1948-1957), which is one of the most important cultural and political periods of change in Thai history. During this period, Thailand was under the guidance of Field Marshal Plaek Phibun Songkram, the soldier-leader of the government. Phibun initiated a 'Nation Building' policy which was a national cultural policy under a nationalist ideology. His policy had a big impact on the transformation of Thai theatrical form, content, and aesthetic concepts. The 'Nation Building' policy can be characterized distinctively by a combination of the theoretical concepts of anti-monarchism, pro-westernization, and ultra-nationalism.³⁰ Like former state governors, Phibun also foresaw the future of the country as one of the civilized nations in Southeast Asia and felt the necessity of modernizing the country by adopting Western culture. He cultivated this extensively through mass media and the Western-style art forms, to propagate his nationalist policy. However, Phibun's 'Nation Building' policy appealed mainly to the urban middle class who had modern tastes and could gain access to mass media. This group of people was sometimes described as the 'centre' in the sense

²⁹ Witayasakpan, pp. 19-20.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

that they lived within the centre-area of state administration; while people living in rural areas far from the influence of, and access to, mass media were called the 'periphery.' The 'periphery' group was not inclined to appropriate modern tastes for a Western lifestyle, like those living in the urban area, and was still free to practice their own cultural lifestyle and aesthetics.³¹ In fact, the 'urban'- 'rural' and the 'centre'- 'periphery' dichotomous sets, according to Witayasakpan's, refer to almost the exact same groups of people. The centre-periphery set is invented merely to describe how the impact of Phibun's national cultural policy was delayed and become ineffective for people living in rural communities. However, to some extent, Phibun succeeded in promoting an awareness by the periphery of the power of the central government in defining a national standard of art forms as he imparted a preference for modernization to the people both in urban and rural areas.

Shakespeare and the Dichotomy of Thai Theatre

How do these dichotomous sets of Thai aesthetics relate to Shakespeare in Thailand? It is very obvious that, since the introduction of Shakespeare's plays into Thai literary and dramatic culture, Shakespeare and his works have always been categorized as part of the 'larger' tradition. He started by being perceived as a novel literary trend in the court tradition during a rapid westernization period. Introduced by the key figure of the court itself, Shakespeare's high-class image was emphasized intensively. When the court tradition ceased its dominating role

³¹ Witayasakpan, p. 4.

because of the change of political circumstance, Shakespeare then shifted from court to urban tradition. He became a symbol of civilization and modernization for the leading educated middle class whose artistic preference and taste turned to Western arts and culture. Today Shakespeare is still preserved within the small circle of literary scholars. His plays have been translated, produced and seen mostly within universities among intellectuals. The fact that the true nature of his works originally belonged to the popular culture has been largely ignored. Shakespeare's dramatic elements which were determined to suit the popular audience's aesthetics and tastes have been left unused and un-investigated by popular theatre practitioners just because he has been labelled as high culture.

Some may argue that Shakespeare is part of English Elizabethan drama and his dramatic elements were designed to suit the popular tastes of Elizabethan audiences four centuries ago. How can his plays, which now seem so outdated, still make perfect sense to audiences in the twenty-first century, not to mention audiences in a different continent with completely different cultural backgrounds? There is, surely, too wide a gap in terms of dramatic traditions, now and then. In terms of the popular audience, unlike the Elizabethan, today's audiences may have to struggle with the archaic language and the unique characteristics of Elizabethan drama. Neilson & Thorndike list some outstanding characteristics of Elizabethan popular drama which pleased Elizabethan audiences; some of them are

their trivial puns and word-play, their overcrowded imagery, their loose and broken structure, their paucity of female roles, their mixture of comic and tragic, their reliance on disguise and mistaken identity as motives, their use of improbable or absurd stories; [...] their variety of subject, their intense interest in

the portrayal of character, the flexibility and audacity of their language, their noble and opulent verse, the exquisite idealism of their romantic love, and their profound analysis of the sources of human tragedy.³²

Although there is a wide gap between Thai and English dramatic cultures, some of Shakespeare's theatrical elements, and his messages, although designed primarily for Elizabethan popular audiences, can still be adapted to suit Thai popular theatre. Elizabethan audiences and today's Thai audiences despite the major differences in language, period of time, and socio-political contexts, share one thing in common: the love of pure entertainment and the willingness to be fully engaged in a play that speaks to them. I therefore propose to find the similarities in these dramatic cultures. This may, then, lead to an answer as to how Thai production teams can overcome the difficulty caused by Shakespeare's 'high culture' image and bring him down from his sacred altar to entertain popular Thai audiences.

³² Neilson and Thorndike, p. 92.

Chapter IV

Classical Forms of Siamese Traditional Drama

In Thailand, Shakespeare may be regarded as a dangerous zone for Thai popular theatre. Indeed, not only Shakespearean productions but other Western playwrights and Western-styled stage plays have hardly been well-received by a massive audience. Shakespearean productions have never really made a successful box-office in public theatres, unlike many successful Shakespearean productions staged elsewhere in Asia. In Japan, for example, Hideki Noda's Trilogy of Shakespearean productions from 1985-1992 were staged in a huge athletics arena to cope with large numbers of enthusiastic audiences and 'the tickets were sold out in a matter of hours, one month in advance of the performance'.¹ That kind of 'Shakespeare craze' phenomenon has never happened in Thailand. In the last two decades, the Thai audience has seen a limited number of local Shakespearean productions, most of which were staged in schools or universities produced and watched within groups of Western literary and theatre students and scholars in educational institutions. There have only been a few times in Thai theatre history that Shakespeare's plays have been staged in large-scale productions by professional theatre troupes and targeted at public audiences rather than university students. Unfortunately, none of these ever succeeded in making a name for

¹ Margaret Shewring, 'Hideki Noda's Shakespeare: the languages of performance', *Shakespeare and the Japanese stage*, ed. by Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 94.

themselves or in making money. The plays by Shakespeare which are more frequently staged than others are of the comedy genre, for example *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Thai audiences seem to prefer Shakespearean comedies to his tragedies and history plays. It is probably because comedy, as an 'easy-to-swallow' dramatic type full of songs, dance, and slapstick jokes, suits perfectly to the Thai audience's taste. A Thai audience does not like a tragic ending to a story, so that even the most popular love story like *Romeo and Juliet*, which is presumably one of the best-known love stories and one that Thai audiences are most familiar with, is hardly ever staged.

Why is Shakespeare, in spite of the fact that his name is well recognized among the common Thai audience, not very well-received when put on stage? Which theatrical elements in Shakespeare do not comply with Thai dramatic tastes and make the audience shy away from him? What can we do to bring Shakespeare out of schools to popular audiences? To provide sensible answers for these questions, it is necessary to have a broad overview of Thai theatrical culture with some comparison with English theatre; the knowledge of resemblances and differences between the two cultures should lead to better understanding of how to stage Shakespeare in a foreign land where a totally different cultural background and different theatrical perceptions are the main concerns. Specifically, Shakespearean theatre during the Elizabethan period, and classical Thai (Siamese) theatre before its westernization and transformation period in the mid-nineteenth century, will be the main focus here; this is because these specific periods of time are considered, in both cultures, the beginning of the major theatrical revolution which has shaped today's theatre.

Undoubtedly, theatrical fashion in the seventeenth century in the case of Shakespearean theatre, and the one before westernization in the mid-nineteenth century in case of Siamese theatre, must be very different from theatrical fashions as we know them today. There might be great differences in the style of acting, the audiences, the actors, and the playhouses. However, there must be some current issues which could be explained by historical approaches, as an historical perspective can somehow throw light on a contemporary issue. My main focus is not to provide a complete comparative theatre study of Elizabethan drama and classical Siamese dance drama. The comparative aspects found here are merely to illustrate the major differences of English and Siamese theatres which have become obstacles to staging Shakespeare's plays in the contemporary Thai popular theatre. The similarities of the two cultures, in the same manner, are discussed here to secure the point that no matter which culture the plays are rooted in, they have some basic elements in common and share the same fundamental purpose – to entertain their audiences. A knowledge of the social and historical background of the country where the dramatic culture originated adds vastly to the enjoyment of the plays themselves and the understanding of the role and function of theatre in a different culture. Regarding popular culture and popular theatre, Alexander Leggatt once commented that 'popular culture [has] a tendency to deal in stock characters and stereotyped situations, a tendency that persists in modern popular drama'.² Therefore, by studying the old theatrical tradition, it could help

² Alexander Leggatt, *Jacobean Public Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 33.

unveil the myth and answer all the questions we now have about how and why things have happened in our theatre today.

I began this research study by forming some fundamental questions and, initially, I assumed that possible answers lay in the wide cultural gap caused by the differences between the English and Thai dramatic traditions. The Thai audience, accustomed to the Thai theatrical style which originated and developed from dance drama, may have a hard time making sense out of Shakespeare's 'purely-spoken' plays. However, this answer seems to be too naive and straightforward for such complex questions. Looking at other indigenous theatrical traditions in Asia, namely in Japan, China, India, their dramatic traditions are also rooted in non-verbal dramatic forms and yet their audiences seem to cope well with Shakespeare's rhetorical plays which are now staged in large numbers and are favourably received by the local audiences. My assumption, nonetheless, may be true to some extent for Thai audiences in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries who were not used to plays with fixed spoken dialogue. It may not be true for modern Thai audiences who, like audiences everywhere in the world, watch films and soaps on television rather than going to live theatre and are now much more acquainted with spoken dialogue and naturalistic acting rather than their own traditional dance drama. The stylization and presentation of Shakespeare's plays, therefore, cannot be the main obstacle to modern audiences.

But even though the form, or format, of Western 'spoken' plays is no longer a problem to the modern popular audience, Western dramatic philosophy,

such as that found in Shakespeare's plots, still is. With more open attitudes, and an acceptance of different dramatic forms and stylization, Thai audiences in general still hold on tightly to the Thai dramatic philosophy that originated in traditional dance drama – plays are for pure entertainment not for self-intellectualization. In other words, Thai audiences see plays to relax, not to be inspired intellectually. With all the characters wearing modern-day attire (instead of glittering attractive dance drama costumes), acting in a naturalistic style and rendering realistic spoken dialogue instead of performing dance movements, Thai drama still presents the same old philosophy through the same old plots and themes as those of dance drama in the past centuries. It is therefore useful to first take an overview of the classical forms of Thai (Siamese) drama, its process of development and westernization, and Thai audiences' aesthetic perception of their own and foreign dramatic forms. By taking all these points into account, a deeper understanding of how Shakespeare is perceived, recreated and appreciated by Thai audiences, and to what extent contemporary theatre practitioners attempt to explore and recreate Shakespeare in the Thai context, can be reached. This chapter therefore aims to familiarize the readers with the principle, ideology, and conventions that Thai people applied toward their dramatic art forms; these concepts also shape Thai audiences' aesthetic perception of the performing arts.

To begin with, it is important to note that English theatre has spent more than 400 years evolving through massive changes and gradual development to form the theatrical style we see today. During this time, English dramatists and theatre practitioners have tried their hands at a wide range of dramatic experiments and had very wide variety of dramatic experiences. English dramatic

fashion has evolved from the early forms of entertainment such as trope, mystery plays, morality plays, dumb shows, and masques to early modern stage plays when the first commercial playhouse was founded in the late-sixteenth century. During the Elizabethan period, drama brought together the popular and the sophisticated and produced a highly developed form of theatre which appealed to all members of society as a ‘common culture’.³

The story of Siamese theatre development is different. In Siam the major theatrical revolution took place only a century ago, when the country started to become open for westernization. Before that, Siamese theatre had only one form of drama – the classical dance drama. The transformation of Siamese classical dance drama into Western style spoken plays happened within only one century. Due to the shorter span of time, by comparison with England, there has been much less experiment in modern Thai theatre. Most Thai ‘Western-style’ productions were purely an imitation of the Western plays and conducted in small dramatic circles of Western-educated elites with no active response or involvement from a wider public audience. Thai audiences in general still very much cling to traditional dramatic stylization and format. Although the classical form of Siamese dance-drama might be out of favour with a modern popular audience now more familiar with realistic acting style, there is still some clear evidence of dance drama theatrical elements and its unique characteristics in modern theatre.

³ Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the traditions of comedy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 16-7.

Lakhon (the word is sometimes transcribed in English as *lakho'n*, *lakorn*, or *lakon*) is the word now commonly used in Thai to refer to drama, theatre, or plays. The traditional theatres in many Southeast Asian countries share a common Indian heritage yet are very different.⁴ Siamese traditional theatre, in particular, like that of other countries in Southeast Asia, draws on a wide range of cultural influences mainly from India and also assimilates various theatrical forms from its neighbours such as China, Khmer, Mon, Java, and Malay.⁵ Despite the imprint of such classic patterns and influences, Siamese theatre has developed an art to suit local conditions and tastes; it has evolved independently within the nation's environment and culture, thereby resulting in a distinctly different art form. Classical forms of Siamese traditional drama originated from dances which were invented to serve religious purpose; the influences of the Hindu and Buddhist religions are particularly marked in this region. Drama underwent successive developments and subsequently became a form of entertainment in the Siamese royal court and was considered a sacred property of the kings. All classical forms of Siamese drama, until the introduction of *lakhon phud* (spoken or straight plays) in the early-twentieth century were of the dance-drama genre.

Broadly speaking, one of the most obvious distinctions between English and Siamese theatre is the fact that English theatre stems from an oral, or story-

⁴ Patraboon Wattasombat, 'The Dance Drama of Thailand' (unpublished MA thesis, California State University, 1981), p. 35.

⁵ Vilawan Svetsreni, 'King Vajiravudh and the Thai spoken drama: his early plays in English and his original Thai lakho'n phut with special emphasis on his innovative uses of drama' (unpublished MA thesis, University of London, The School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991), p. 8.

telling culture in which words are considered the most essential dramatic medium, while Siamese theatre originated from dance so the importance of rhetoric is almost totally disregarded. The focus of Siamese drama is exclusively on the dance movement and music. For English theatre, Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights such as Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson should be credited for highlighting the importance of rhetoric. It is their words which still exist today and are adored by audiences nationwide. It is their words that shaped modern professional theatre not only in their native country but around the globe. During Shakespeare's time, English theatre started to combine all sort of entertainments together ranging from aristocratic entertainments and academic theatre to street theatre; all these dramatic forms share one significant theatrical element and meanwhile are distinctly separated from each other by this very same element – word use.

All types of traditional Siamese drama rely completely on the dance gestures accompanied by music as a means to communicate, rather than on spoken dialogue. The lack of dialogue prevails in Siamese drama as James R. Brandon describes:

Although Aristotle mentioned music and spectacle as parts of Greek tragedy and we have opera and ballet in the West, we are, nevertheless, largely conditioned to think of drama in terms of the spoken word. To get a proper feeling for Southeast Asian theatre, we must abandon this preconception. Music sets a tone and an atmosphere within which a performance is created. It offers possibilities unrivalled by the spoken word for conveying and amplifying emotional states. The movement patterns of dance provide a visual structure on which the action of

a play can be hung. Both music and dance appeal to our sense of the beautiful in a way no spoken drama can.⁶

As spoken dialogues are considered nonessential in Siamese traditional drama, the main focus of attention is thus on visual spectacles. *Lakhon* or ‘drama’ in Thai language is defined in the official Thai language dictionary published by the Royal Institute of Thailand in 1982, as ‘a kind of performances [in] which performers wear elaborate costumes; play-texts are written in verse, and loudly sung [by a singer or a group of chorus], accompanied by music and dance’ [My translation]. This definition clearly reflects Thai dramatic perceptions as well as a Thai audience’s expectation of ‘drama’ as spectacle. The new meaning of *lakhon* in the official Thai language dictionary has been re-defined in the newly-published version in 1999 as ‘a type of performance which has players, stage or venue of performance, scripts for the players to act. Most of which is accompanied by different types of music’ [My translation]. As noticed from these two definitions, we may be able to conclude that when it comes to *lakhon* or drama, Thai audiences tend to place importance on visual effects rather than on other theatrical elements. They look for nothing more than being visually dazzled by the physical beauties of actors and their costumes with an accompaniment of music and dance. Playscripts, which traditionally used to be largely disregarded, became more significant when the country was open to the assimilation of Western drama. These concepts are firmly and deeply rooted in Thai dramatic

⁶ James R. Brandon, *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 125.

culture and can still be seen everywhere in today's stage plays, drama series on television and Thai modern films.



Figure 6 – Thai court dance drama (*lakhon*) in the late-nineteenth century

It is also worth noting here that the idea of realistic ‘acting’ as such, to which today's audiences are now generally accustomed, never existed in Siamese traditional drama. Siamese ‘actors’ did not act by rendering the lines; they were dancers who were finely trained to express their emotions through their dance movements, not even through their facial expressions. They were, rather, mediums to communicate the story and express the theme by precisely executing the particular dance movements. La Meri and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy who compare the differences in conceptions and techniques between the classical dances of the West and the East, observes that Western dance, in general, aims to excite and tends to be more emotionally expressive while Oriental dance aims to soothe and tends to be more compressive. Western dance is a vehicle for reflecting the dancer's personality. An Oriental dancer, on the other hand, is likely to suppress his personality to become the vehicle of the theme. With this frame of

conception, Siamese classical dancers even nowadays have been familiarised with the idea that, 'it is the action, not the actor, which is essential to dramatic art'.⁷

In general, classical forms of Siamese dance drama can be differentiated into two main forms, *khon* (mask dance drama) and *lakhon* ([without mask] dance drama).⁸ The primary concentration of this chapter is the Siamese *lakhon* form and the process of its development and westernization. *Khon* or mask dance drama, therefore, will not be mentioned here. With regard solely to Siamese dance drama, classical forms which epitomize the court and popular dichotomy are *lakhon nai* and *lakhon nok*. The 'high class' form is *lakhon nai* (court dance drama) whereas the 'low class' form is *lakhon nok* (dance drama outside the court). Although the forms of *lakhon* differ in their styles of dancing, music, expression, and dramatic purposes, there are some resemblances, most particularly the basic elements such as costumes and music.

Lakhon nai

Lakhon nai was a female dance drama which belonged to the royal court (*nai* means 'inside').⁹ This style of *lakhon* places great emphasis on the perfection of the dance movements, musical quality, highly crafted costumes and

⁷ La Meri and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Gesture Language of the Hindu Dance* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1964), pp. 4-6.

⁸ The players of *lakhon* do not wear masks unless they represent the parts of demons, animals or some beings other than human.

⁹ Wattasombat suggests that the term *lakhon nai* is believed to be a contraction of *lakhon nang nai*. 'Nang nai' means ladies of the palace, indicating its characteristic of an all-female cast in court theatre.

aestheticism of verse play-text.¹⁰ All characters, male and female, were played by women (most of whom were the ladies of the court), with the exception of the demon and the clown which were portrayed by males, probably because of the acrobatic nature of their performance.¹¹ Since this form of *lakhon* had always been closely associated with the Siamese kings as part of royal ceremony, it therefore placed great importance on the perfection of dancing in order to display its superior status. To maintain the sacred status of divine kingship, *lakhon nai* carried with it a sense of seriousness and formality and was elaborately executed by court-trained performers.¹² Court drama with its more refined theatrical practices became the standard that popular drama outside the court looked up to and somehow imitated – especially the dance movement.

Lakhon nok

Lakhon nok dance drama, on the other hand, belonged to popular tradition. It was performed by male players and female impersonators in lively presentations which were much more suited to the general audience outside the royal court (*nok* means ‘outside’). This dramatic type was of lesser artistic quality than the *lakhon nai*.¹³ It originally consisted of two to three male performers, each of whom played several roles. Certain characteristics of *lakhon nok* made it a

¹⁰ M.R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs, ‘Performing Arts of the Royal Court’, *Selected Articles by M.R. Chakrarot Chitrabongs* (Bangkok: Printed by Office of the Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Culture, 2004), p. 18.

¹¹ Wattasombat, p. 53.

¹² Witayasakpan, p. 25.

¹³ Chitrabongs, p. 19.

folk theatre form favoured by popular audiences. The common people found *lakhon nok* fascinating because of its faster pace of action, with less dancing (and obviously less refined), fast plot development, and colloquial language.¹⁴ Originally, there was no written script and acting was based on the performer's wit and improvisation, which were inherent qualities of popular tradition. Comic elements such as crude jokes were among its indispensable qualities though they tended to lack intricacy and witticism relying more on verbal rhyme exchange, slapstick, absurdity and low comedy.¹⁵

For *lakhon nok*, a realistic style of acting and improvised spoken dialogue were more common than in *lakhon nai*. As it was the popular form of drama, *lakhon nok* did not carry the conventional rules of the court. Its stylization therefore tended towards naturalism. Actors even though they had to perform dance movement, were inclined towards realistic acting in order to draw their audience into the play. Siamese *lakhon nok* consisted of only few actors working with few instruments and props. This made it very convenient for a theatre troupe to travel around from place to place. Permanent playhouses or regular venues were not really necessary for Siamese dance drama troupes at that period.¹⁶

¹⁴ Wattasombat, p. 74.

¹⁵ Mattani Mojdara Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996), p. 12.

¹⁶ Mattani Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], *Laksana Thai [Thai Characters]*, ed. by Kukrit Pramoj and Ni-on Sanitwong na Ayuthaya, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thaiwattanaphanit, 2008), p. 59.

Although it is plausible to believe that court tradition provided artistic standards for popular theatre and maintained hegemonic leadership, there is some evidence showing that the court sometimes adopted some elements from popular theatre as well.¹⁷ Damrong-rajanubhab who is one of the most well-known Siamese scholars in the History of Siam, believes that popular dance drama had existed and developed before that of the court. The term *lakhon* itself originally referred to a form of entertainment of ordinary people, not of the court's creativity.¹⁸ However, due to scant historical evidences, it is hard to reconstruct the interaction between court and popular traditions. Most historical records related to Siamese theatre, unsurprisingly, focuses mainly on court tradition as most literate people who could write and read were among elites in the court. Not much attention has been given to the performances of ordinary people. Popular performances therefore can rarely be found in written records and are mentioned from time to time in chronicles only when they were part of public celebrations during state religious festivals.¹⁹

Despite the aforementioned different characteristics of the dichotomous Siamese dance drama, both traditions of Siamese *lakhon* share certain fundamental theatrical elements such as stage settings, music, costumes, and general dramatic plots. Those elements have been borrowed, exchanged, and

¹⁷ Witayasakpan, p. 25.

¹⁸ Prince Damrong-rajanubhab, *Prachoom Phraniphon Bettaled* [Selected articles by Prince Damrong-rajanubhab], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Chuan Pim, 1966), pp. 10-2.

¹⁹ Witayasakpan, p. 25.

developed within the two traditions through a long period of time. The process has eventually shaped what may be called in a broad sense, the ‘dramatic tastes’ of the Thai audiences. The concept of ‘dramatic taste’ or ‘dramatic aesthetics’ of a Thai audience is worth emphasizing here as it is considered a historical product which has genuinely and gradually evolved within Thai society and its cultural system. In the view of Witayasakpan, the concept of tastes is salient as it shows the audience’s perception and sense of beauty. Although this perception can be altered by changes of socio-political factors, it can perfectly demonstrate what people enjoy at a particular given period.²⁰

Characteristics and Basic Elements of Siamese Dance Drama: Forming Thai Dramatic Tastes

The following section describes some significant characteristics of traditional Siamese *lakhon* with which Siamese audiences have been familiar. Some of these characteristics of the traditional dance drama, such as dramatic plots and stereotyped characters, have had great importance and influence in shaping modern Thai aesthetics and can still be seen generally in Thai drama today.

An observation from a contemporary foreign writer, Philip Cornwell-Smith, on Thai popular drama – in this sense the television series which now have become the most popular form of Thai drama (rather than stage performance) –

²⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

shows quite clearly that the dramatic tastes of modern popular audiences are not really so different from the tastes of audiences a century ago:

Thai soaps differ from those abroad in the way their very fixed characters still conform to traditional moral roles. Adopted from India into every Thai classical art, the Ramayana epic is cast with eternal archetypes, good, bad, and ugly [with] multi-purpose celebrities lead the cast [and] the theme song tops the charts [...] Just as the entire Ramayana story takes literally days for dancers to perform and fills dozens of mural panels, soaps unfold thrice weekly for 30-50 episodes. Eventually they reach braking point, stop, change set, cast and costume, they restart the tale in new guise. [...] The handful of production companies often reshoot the exact same stories within just a few years, with over half a dozen remakes [...] The audience apparently loves to weep over familiar love triangles, reuniting and revenges. Among practical reasons for repeats, sponsors like predictability and few modern scripts or novels inspire such responses.²¹

According to Cornwel-Smith, Thai popular drama in the eyes of the outsider may look amusingly commonplace and characterless. The outsider may not understand on a deep level why Thai audiences can continue watching plays with similar plots again and again and not seem to care for new stories or new plots. This is simply because the modern Thai audience is deeply familiar with common dramatic elements and dramatic patterns inherited from those of the dance drama tradition. It is, therefore, important to understand the characteristics

²¹ Philip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* (Bangkok: Sirivatana Printing Co. Ltd., 2005), pp. 238-9.

and basic theatrical elements of Siamese dance drama, in order to understand Thai popular drama today.

Music

For Siamese dance drama, music was definitely an inseparable part of the performance as it helped direct the actors to perform certain dance movements and actions in particular scenes. The idea of Siamese music, as James R. Brandon notes, is that like the traditional music of most other Southeast Asian theatres, ‘certain melodies should go with certain characters or situations or actions’.²² In Siamese theatre, this musical practice was very diverse, and was sometimes referred to as ‘action tunes’ or action melodies. The tunes varied depending on the main theme of each action: so there was a ‘walking tune’, a ‘laughing tune’, a ‘weeping tune’, an ‘anger tune’, and so on. When the orchestra struck up one of these tunes the actors would know at once what they were supposed to do and so they danced or acted accordingly.²³ These tunes or melodies came from the oral tradition; they were handed down through generations by oral transmission, from music teachers to pupils and from old singers to young.

In modern Thai drama, because it has been transformed from dance drama to Western-style drama, music is no longer the major element to direct the action of the players. However, songs and music are still an essential part of Thai

²² Brandon, p. 134.

²³ Vajiravudh, King of Siam, ‘Notes on the Siamese Theatre’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, Vol. 55.1 (Bangkok: Printed under Royal Patronage, 1967), p. 7.

popular drama as they help to establish the appropriate dramatic mood for each scene. Many top-chart pop songs today come from the theme songs of famous popular drama.

Players

Traditional dance drama actors, almost as a rule, would not sing by themselves, as it was practically difficult to sing and perform the elaborate dances at the same time. Traditional actors or dancers merely danced and posed to illustrate the narration of the story which was sung by a group of chorus. However, they sometimes delivered certain lines themselves. As mentioned earlier, the dances or motions of the actors in Siamese drama have been likened to the language of the dance. These motions are frequently composed of one, or a combination of several, stylized motions, sometimes involving only the hands, but more likely involving the whole body moving rhythmically to instrumental music or to the narrative words.²⁴

The dance movements of Siamese drama were always fixed. During the rehearsal or in a dance class, the dance master would demonstrate the movement step by step, which the students or the actors were supposed to imitate as closely as possible. The students who succeeded in demonstrating their dance potential would be awarded an important role and officially supported to become the lead

²⁴ Fern S. Ingersoll, *Sang Thong A Dance Drama from Thailand written by King Rama II & Parts of His Court* (Vermont & Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company of Rutland, 1973), p. 29.

dancer. The dance master would provide them with harder and harder lessons. Innovative interpretation or adaptation of any dance movement was unacceptable. So, the most serious misdeeds could be committed by those actors who challenged or changed the fixed dance routines. Such wrongful action, was commonly called *Pid Kru* [doing wrong to the master].²⁵ There was no real punishment for those who committed such an act. However, in practice, no one would dare to violate the fixed rules and conventions as the Siamese dance drama tradition was regarded as a sacred artistic form handed down for many generations. Furthermore, this art was believed to be guarded and protected by gods of arts and the spirits of the masters. There was a strong superstitious belief that students or dancers who committed *Pid Kru* acts would be punished by these gods and spirits. It appears that the concept of *Pid Kru* helped to prevent, or at least failed to encourage, innovative and experimental practices in Siamese traditional drama; however, its existence also helped to preserve the original artistic form of the national dramatic tradition.

Settings and costumes

Conventionally, Siamese *lakhon* was not performed on stage or even in a proper theatre. The chief requirement was an empty space where the dances and actions could be performed adequately. Thus, no scenery or stage furniture was required and very few stage properties were used; a few trees, for example, were

²⁵ Mattani Ratnin, *Kwam Roo Bueng Ton Keaw Kab Karn Sillapa Karn Kamkap Lakhon Wethi*, [Introduction to Stage Theatre Directing], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thammasart University Press, 2003), pp. 12-3.

placed when the scene was supposed to be a garden.²⁶ In the later period, settings became more important as they provided a way to please the audience with dazzling visual effects. Permanent painting back-drop setting was adopted as this was a very simple and practical way to change the scene quickly from a palace to, perhaps, a jungle. These back-drop settings are still found in use today, mostly by local dance drama troupes.

Costumes of traditional dance drama were carefully made as they were very delicate and elaborate. All of them were made to resemble those worn in Siam in the old times and they have not changed during successive generations.

Playscripts and common plots

The playscripts (*bot lakhon*) were traditionally serialized and written only in verse forms (with a few poetic-prose dialogues) and were sung by a troupe of singers. The stories were usually taken from Siamese dramatic literature. Although the scripts were based on dramatic literature, they did not appear in the Western form of a 'real script', but rather as a combination of narration, dialogue, and directions for music.²⁷ Kusuma Raksamanee asserts that Siamese playscripts were written for a dual purpose: for reading and/or for staging. Conventionally, the Siamese drama consisted of many independent episodes attached together in which each individual scene was structurally complete within itself. Thus, there was no need to stage all the episodes continuously. Indeed, it is quite impossible

²⁶ Vajiravudh, 'Notes on the Siamese Theatre', p. 5.

²⁷ Svetsreni, p. 14.

for all the episodes to be staged within one theatrical production. Even to perform one episode selected from a long epic may take a few days or even weeks to finish.²⁸

The plots of Siamese *lakhon* were largely based on Indian mythology and epics; however, there were some genuine, original Siamese folk tales of great merit and popularity. Sometimes the myths of the Jakata tales, which were basically the stories of the incarnation of the Buddha, also provided the source of popular dramatic plots. Most of the plots were centred on larger-than-life figures such as gods, ancient kings, celestial beings, princes and princesses and mythological animals. All the stories dramatized the activities of these super characters. These tales usually involved episode after episode portraying long adventures of heroes fighting against, and winning over, their enemies in fantasy worlds.²⁹ Siamese dramatic literature, in fact, was not extensive. New pieces were rarely ever created and introduced. All the best pieces have now attained the rank of Siamese classics.

According to Gary Carkin, most of the popular themes of the Siamese traditional *lakhon* can be categorized into the melodramatic type, strongly influenced by two conjoined concepts: Buddhism and kingship. Buddhism was brought to Siam around the sixth century A.D., and was promoted as the state religion with the establishment of the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai (Siam's first

²⁸ Quoted in Wattasombat, pp. 52-3.

²⁹ Wattasombat, pp. 51-2.

capital city during 1238-1419). Since then, Buddhism has been embedded into all aspects of Siamese culture including traditional drama. The most important among all Buddhist concepts to which Siamese Buddhists have been attached, is the concept of 'karma' and merit.³⁰ Karma can be seen as a predilection toward good or bad action depending upon one's past lives. Good karma is produced by good action, bad karma through evil action. Due to Buddhist teachings, Siamese dramatic plots have always carried the moral lesson that 'good begets good and evil begets evil'. Carkin emphasizes this point:

[*Lakhon*] offer a panorama of images emerging from the deepest levels of the Thai culture consciousness which serve to motivate the Thai toward "good" action by reflection upon the result of bad action. As such, they reinforce the tendency to behave according to Buddhist teaching and the Traditionalist way [...].³¹

The concept of merit is closely linked with the concept of karma. It is strongly believed that right action produces good merit, and merit is reflected by one's station in life. It is also interwoven with the idea of kingship and superiority in a sense that being born noble or superior is the result of a remarkable degree of merit. It was good deeds in one's previous life which contributed to noble birth. The heroes in traditional Siamese *lakhon*, therefore, were always high-born characters such as kings, queens, princes, and princesses. Also, as a result of good

³⁰ Carkin, p. 40.

³¹ Carkin, p. 199.

merit, these characters were blessed to be born with astonishing physical beauty.³² Hence, they are worthy of an equivalent amount of adoration. Most heroes and heroines, both in traditional dance drama and modern popular drama, are expected to have outstanding physical beauty. Good-looking actors are thus what Thai drama seeks for: good physical appearance is as much or sometimes even more important than an actor's acting skills.

Traditional Siamese *lakhon* deals almost entirely with court life. The reason for this, again, appears to lie in the hierarchical world-view from which the Siamese audiences perceive life.³³ Noble characters, in a state of being higher than the commoners because of their past-life merit, are expected to display moral qualities as well as good manners which could be followed by the audience. Since these characters are figures worthy of adoration, they are also seen as the great protectors and unifiers who are capable of bringing peace and can conclude all kinds of conflicts in the stories. In Siamese traditional *lakhon*, unification and reconciliation clearly seem to be the ultimate goal to be achieved by the hero.³⁴ It is therefore no surprise to observe that, even today, popular drama inherits this concept. Main characters in today's drama, though no longer princes or princesses, are still people of high social rank, for example a hero who is a wealthy business man or a heroine who comes from a family with a royal-related background.

³² Witayasakpan, pp. 57-8.

³³ Carkin, p. 40.

³⁴ Carkin, p. 73.

The need for unification, or for a 'happy ending', seems to be a compulsory element in Siamese traditional *lakhon*. Local audiences, as Nopamat Veohong observes, 'allegedly opt more for laughs and fun than tears and depth of meaning'.³⁵ With strong belief in karma and the Buddhist concept of 'good begets good, and evil begets evil', Thai audience therefore prefers happy-ending plays with all problems solved and all conflicts reconciled: the virtuous heroes and heroines are rewarded with love, marriage, and fortune; villains are defeated and punished or reformed and forgiven. Attending a *lakhon* performance could be, as Wattanasombat puts it, 'an instructive but delightful and pleasurable experience' for the Thais, since every *lakhon* story always affirms the cultural values that they respect and believe in.³⁶ However, the tragic and melodramatic elements are also indispensable. The heroes might experience misfortune and suffering in the plays due to their past karma. Yet in the end they would be rescued and find happiness due to, again, their merit accumulated in previous life.³⁷ Tragic endings or the death of the main characters in Siamese traditional drama are always avoided; the heroes always win over obstacles and are saved from any harmful situations. If there is a death scene, it is never depicted directly on stage due to a superstition that to do so would bring misfortune to the theatre troupe. The audience members, who seek a soothing fantasy as a break from their real, difficult lives can be

³⁵ Nopamat Veohong, 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', Unpublished paper presented at the international conference on SHAKESPEARE PERFORMANCE IN THE NEW ASIAs, Organized by the Department of English, The National University of Singapore, 28-30 June 2002, p. 1.

³⁶ Wattanasombat, p. 53.

³⁷ Witayasakpan, p. 58.

certain every time they attend a *lakhon* performance that they will be emotionally comforted by poetic justice in the resolution of the play in a way in which they may not find in real life.³⁸

Characters

The characters in Siamese traditional drama were often flat and stereotypical. Protagonists and antagonists were sharply differentiated from one another. Generally, there are two main protagonist characters: the *phra ek* (hero) and the *nang ek* (heroine). The character of the *phra ek* (hero) in Siamese traditional drama personifies the Siamese ideal of manhood. Carkin suggests that the character is probably based on life of the Buddha which was influenced by Hindu conceptions of princely behaviour. As a rule, the hero must be, as Carkin puts it, 'physically appealing, morally right, and romantically inclined'.³⁹ The *nang ek* (heroine), similar to the hero, supplies the Siamese female with a traditional role model of an ideal lady. Apart from her apparent physical beauty, she also demonstrates virtues (according to Buddhist concepts) such as loyalty, calmness, and forgiveness.

The *tua kong* (male villain) is an extreme opposite of the hero. He is naturally born evil-minded, exemplifying the Buddhist fundamental wickedness

³⁸ Wattanasombat, p. 54.

³⁹ Carkin, p. 152.

of greed, anger, and delusion.⁴⁰ With his threatening looks, aggressive manner, and hoarse voice, it is very easy to spot him among the other characters. In a similar manner, the *tua itcha* (female villain) is the heroine's opposite figure. If the *nang ek* is a role model for a perfect female, the *tua itcha* thus demonstrates all sorts of behaviour which step outside the Buddhist and Siamese manner of womanhood and motherhood. She is aggressive, outspoken, argumentative, and openly flaunts her sexual charms.⁴¹

The most significant supporting character in Siamese drama is the *tua talok* or the *joke* (clowns). The clowns are usually peasants who become servants or soldiers in the company of the *phra ek* (hero). Because they are the non-aristocratic characters, they often display their unrefined manner in various humorous ways. However, the clowns are extremely witty characters and are often rendered a total freedom of speech when speaking to their superiors. If the *phra ek*, as Carkin puts it, projects the image of the ideal Siamese male, the *tua talok* thus represents the image and spirit of the folk.⁴²

The Siamese popular audience

The role of Siamese drama, especially in the early period, was chiefly to entertain. Siamese audiences always came to the theatre to relax and have a pleasant break from their normal routine. They simply wanted to enjoy the beauty

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 179.

⁴² Ibid., p. 169.

of the dances (performed skillfully by well-trained dancers in extravagant costumes), and to laugh at witty, crude jokes. Siamese *lakhon* was not created to educate or intellectualize the audience. Moreover, Siamese audiences paid very little attention to the development of the plot since they had a full knowledge of the entire story being staged. Most of the plots were taken from well-known dramatic tales and literature with which they were already familiar. They probably heard and saw the stage versions frequently so they knew very well what had happened and what would happen next. King Chulalongkorn (reigned 1868-1910), on attending a performance, made a remark about the Siamese audience's natural behaviour in a private letter to one of his queen consorts, Chao Dararatsami, dated 24 April 1909:

Usually, people who go to see a play like to sit and talk with each other. Only to see the dancers moving about here and there, to hear a little singing and some sounds from the orchestra, that's enough.⁴³

Siamese audiences did not sit still and concentrate solely on the performance. As there was no formal indoor theatre, the audience was free to walk in and out of the performance whenever they wanted; they could also chat with friends and eat while watching the play. When they came back they could always follow the plot. Wattanasombat offers a clear conclusion that, for the Siamese audience, 'it is neither the excitement of a new plot nor the interest of

⁴³ Quoted in Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 139.

character development for which they come. But rather, it is the satisfaction of the mind in seeing the long-loved dramatic tales being staged, knowing that eventually good will righteously conquer evil and the conclusion will always be happy'.⁴⁴

Siamese traditional dance drama in both court and popular theatres began to decline as the country moved into a new era with the period of intensive westernization in the nineteenth century. Western dramatic style and new forms of *lakhon* were introduced and several changes were made in Siamese traditional *lakhon* circles. The aesthetic concepts were also transformed. Traditional dance drama came to be viewed as old-fashioned, whereas Western drama was considered to be modern. Most important of all the new forms which had a major impact on Siamese theatre was the introduction of spoken drama by King Vajiravudh in the early twentieth century.

⁴⁴ Wattanasombat, p. 54.

Chapter V

Transformation of Thai Theatre

From Traditional Dance Drama to Spoken Drama

Thailand, or Siam, started to move into the modern era in the mid 1850s during King Chulalongkorn's reign (1868-1910). This was a true period of modernization. The country was aware of the need to develop in order to avoid colonization by Western powers. King Chulalongkorn's reign (or commonly known as King Rama V), clearly marked the moment of a subtle synthesizing process between the old Siamese tradition and modern Western culture in every aspect of Siamese society. There was acceleration in establishing new administrative economic, social, education, cultural, and religious organizations to modernize and develop the country. Mattani Ratnin has emphasized the importance of the period in *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*:

Fifth Reign [King Chulalongkorn's reign] reflected the attempt of a modern monarch to have the best of two worlds, the old and the new, the *farang* [Thai word used to refer to a white Western foreigner – my explanation] and the Thai. Siam was to be the modern leader of the peninsula and the dignified, respectable

‘East’ in the eyes of the West. New Siam under King Rama V was to attain the same position in all its grandeur and prosperity in a wider sphere.¹

In order to obtain a ‘respectable’ image in the eyes of the West, the country had to adopt Western culture and practices such as styles of living, customs, sports, and also entertainment. The changes, of course, started first among the aristocrats in the royal court and later spread to the wealthy upper-middle class outside the court. Siamese drama became a crucial part of cultural development, which for political reasons helped promote a refined and cultural image of the country as stable, and as a modern nation, and to show off to the West the rich Siamese cultural heritage and the grandeur of the royal court.²

Western influence on Siamese drama, and the process of assimilation, brought the traditional dramatic arts into the new era. During this period of change, the Siamese theatrical aesthetic was still under the direction and hegemonic control of the royal court. However, it now became fashionable among the westernized upper-class circle to become supporters of the dramatic arts.³ With the pioneering spirit and hard-working effort of a few aristocratic dramatists of the age, new dramatic forms (or modernized traditional forms) were invented. Their works mark a milestone in the development of Siamese theatre which sets

¹ Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 96.

² Ibid., p. 166.

³ Svetsreni, p. 18.

standards and models for the modern Thai theatre and for the new Thai dramatic aesthetic for later generations.

There was considerable change in dramatic interest and taste as a newly modernized generation was exposed, for the first time, to Western civilization. In Siamese dance drama, or *lakhon*, Western influences became apparent in the development and expansion of classical dance drama into new forms of dramatic activities, incorporating more realism in acting and elocution on the part of the dancers. The depiction of theatrical development in Siam during this critical period would become fragmentary without mentioning the emergence of three significant forms of Siamese dramatic innovation: *lakhon dukdamban*, *lakhon phan thang*, and *lakhon rong*.

Lakhon Dukdamban

Lakhon dukdamban was newly devised with Western influence. The Thai word *dukdamban*, meaning ‘antiquity’, does not indicate the meaning or nature of a play: the name actually came from the name of a theatre group and a theatre house.⁴ The most significant people, who deserve credit for their innovative theatrical experiments as the creators of this new form of *lakhon*, are Prince Narisaranuwattiwong, brother of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V), and Chao Phraya Thewetwongwiwat, chief of the Krom Mahorasop (Department of Royal Entertainment). In 1891 Chao Phraya Thewet went to Europe. During his trip, he

⁴ Witayasakpan, p. 34.

had several opportunities to see European operas which very much captured his interest so that he wished to apply the Western form and techniques to Siamese classical music and dance drama. Upon his return to Siam, he consulted with Prince Naris about the idea of adapting the style of European opera with Siamese dance drama. Prince Naris, being an ardent experimentalist, immediately agreed to try his hand at composing a new stage script for this innovation, using Siamese folk drama stories and classical music. Chao Phraya Thewet himself took part in directing the performance. As the chief of the Department of Royal Entertainment, Chao Phraya Thewet had direct access to the Royal theatre troupe so that he could work with dance masters and leading dancers, most of whom were renowned as the best in the country. The new creation of *lakhon* therefore emerged in the form of an opera combined with ballet, having the dancers sing their parts as well as dance.⁵

There are some of the most important features of *lakhon dukdamban* which mark a major difference from the traditional form of dance drama. Firstly, there is the complete absence of narration sung by a chorus and the discarding of the convention of announcing or introducing a character on stage. By cutting out descriptive verses, especially those elaborating upon the actions and sentiments of the characters, the plot was tightened. Secondly, with the absence of the chorus, the dancers in the *lakhon dukdamban* danced and sang their parts by themselves. New playscripts, or lyrics, which were usually taken from classical dramatic texts,

⁵ Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, pp. 124-33.

were now divided into scenes and acts instead of continuous verse as before – and these were presented in very condensed form, to shorten the performance time. Thirdly, the dialogues, which conventionally were written in verse form, in *lakhon dukdamban* are mostly written in prose and in colloquial everyday language. The characters, who only used to dance in accordance with the song and music, now spoke like the aristocrats of the period. The actors improvised the dialogues which depended largely on the wit and humour of the performers themselves. In general, the refined characters spoke poetically, using noble language, while the comedians and villains of lowly character used vulgar, colloquial language to create a contrast.

The new dance-drama-opera production was first presented as a response to Rama V's wish to have entertainment for foreign dignitaries.⁶ The innovative form of *lakhon* performed at the new theatre called Rong Lakhon Dukdamban [Dukdamban Theatre], was hence named after the theatre, the *lakhon dukdamban*. When not commissioned by the King, the company gave public performances and collected admission fees in the same fashion as other theatres.

⁶ According to Ratnin, [*Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p.127], the first performance was presented in 1899 to welcome the royal visit of Prince Henry, brother of the King of Prussia at the Rong Lakhon Dukdamban [Dukdamban Theatre] which was a new theatre specially designed and constructed for this purpose by Chao Phraya Thewet in his own residence.



Figure 7 – A scene from *Ramakien* (Indian Ramayana) in the form of *lakhon dukdamban*

It is interesting to note that this new playhouse, when finished, was given the name Rong Lakhon Dukdamban instead of being named after the theatre owners as conventionally practised in that period. The reason behind this, as some scholars have suggested, perhaps lies in the dichotomy of Siamese theatre; the high tradition (court theatre) and low tradition (popular theatre) were apparently separated from one another. The general perception and attitude of the Siamese in the old days towards popular theatre was quite negative; an acting career was considered as a humble job for low-class people. Although the kings and the upper-class circle traditionally acted as patrons of the dramatic arts and encouraged artistic creations, they supported the arts for the purpose of displaying their superior social status. Hence, in the case of Chao Phraya Thewet naming his playhouse Dukdamban, instead of using his own name, he was probably trying to prevent any possible insulting remarks suggesting that an aristocrat earned a

living by running a playhouse.⁷ This fashion was also adopted by other dramatist aristocrats who owned other theatres.

Lakhon Phan Thang

Another form of new experimental creation in Siamese theatre is *lakhon phan thang*, which literally means ‘thousand ways’ or ‘thousand sources’. Similar to *lakhon dukdamban*, this new form is also a deviation from the traditional dance drama. The most important feature which marks a difference between these two innovative dramatic forms is the source from which the dramatic scripts are taken. While *lakhon dukdamban*, although applying the innovative style of theatrical presentation adapted from Western opera and ballet, still mainly used Siamese classical playscripts based on Siamese folk tales; *lakhon phan thang*, on the other hand, used legends of different ethnic groups as sources offering literary freshness.⁸ This genre indicates the diverse sources of stories from foreign tales and chronicles, including Burmese, Mon, Lao, Chinese, Indian, Cambodian, Malay, Javanese, and *farang* [Western], in order to give exotic flavour. Characters, dances, and music tunes were also newly-created in accordance with the source of the stories. More movements as in everyday life were added, and dance movements were suggestive of various ethnic groups. Costumes were to

⁷ Sawanya Issaraporn, *Jungwa Kao Lakhon Wethee* [Stage Performance: The moving steps], Thai Texts (Bangkok: No publishing company indicated, 1987), p. 15.

⁸ Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 118.

some degree similar to the court fashion, but also recalled ethnic traditions. These plays tell stories through dialogue with only a little singing and less formality.⁹



Figure 8 – A production of *The Arabian Nights* in a form of *lakhon phan thang*

This form of dance drama was invented by Chaophraya Mahintharasakthamrong, an aristocrat who is also credited as the first owner of a commercial playhouse. His theatre was named ‘Prince Theatre’ after a theatre

⁹ Witayasakpan, pp. 35-6.

house in London which Chaophraya Mahin visited when he was a diplomat in England.¹⁰

Lakhon Rong

The third new genre was singing-drama, or *lakhon rong* – also known as *lakhon pridalai* after the name of a theatre troupe which originally introduced and performed this type of play.¹¹ *Lakhon rong* is a straight imitation of Western opera in which singers convey the drama through songs and music. Ratnin suggests that the most important feature which distinguished *lakhon rong* from the two former innovative forms, *lakhon dukdamban* and *lakhon phan thang*, was the fact that *lakhon rong*, while still combining music, songs, and some spoken dialogue, diminished the dance which had always been the heart of Siamese traditional drama.¹² Now actors communicated through facial expressions rather than traditional dance movements. They might suggest an elevated level of performing by moving their hands and fingers slightly.¹³ Performers sang their own ‘dialogue’, while other singing parts, such as the narration and refrain, were sung by a group of chorus.

¹⁰ Damrong-rajanubhab, pp. 141-2.

¹¹ Witayasakpan, p. 36.

¹² Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 142.

¹³ Because of the hand movement of the actors, this new type of theatrical form was sometimes referred to as a ‘close and open hand’ play; as it did not produce any intricate movement much beyond accentuating the closing and opening of the hands.

The performance also incorporated many of the elements of spoken drama such as a naturalistic acting style which, at that time, was very new to Siamese audiences who had been accustomed to dance drama only. The new form, therefore, did not gain much attention from the public. However, Prince Narathip, who was the creator of this drama genre, continually produced plays adapted from various foreign exotic tales. Within a few years this new dramatic form started to gain more success and received positive responses, first from courtier audiences and, later, from middle-class audiences outside the palace. This popularity was boosted when the King officially accepted the role of patron of the plays. *Lakhon rong* then became a new fashionable trend; realistic acting and spoken dialogues started to, little by little, look less foreign to local audiences. The greatest success in the *lakhon rong* genre, produced by Prince Narathip, was *Sao Khrua Fah*, the adaptation of *Madame Butterfly*. The scene is set in Chiangmai, a beautiful northern province of Siam, instead of Japan as in the original version. It tells a story of a young army officer from Bangkok who falls in love with a young beautiful and naive Chiangmai girl and finally leaves her broken-hearted with a fatherless child.¹⁴

¹⁴ Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 140.



Figure 9 – A production of *Sao Khrua Fah* (an adaptation of *Madame Butterfly*) in a form of *lakhon rong*

Lakhon rong, compared to the other two forms (*lakhon dukdamban*, and *lakhon phan thang*), was in favour with Siamese audiences for a very long period. It gained commercial popularity prior to the political change in 1932 and provided a model for many theatre troupes. However, it has slowly declined and fallen out of favour, being replaced by the introduction of films imported from the West and television dramas. Nevertheless, there are a number of productions, including their songs and music which are still remembered by today's audiences, some of which have become classic pieces of Thai dramatic work.¹⁵

¹⁵ Panya Nittayasuwan, 'Nawalak Lakhon Rong' [Characteristics of *Lakhon Rong* in Thailand], *Thai Magazine*, 21-76 (October-December 1970), pp. 50-3.

Introduction of *Lakhon Phud* (Spoken Play) by King Vajiravudh

Importantly, the Siamese dramatic circle moved to another level of modernization with the introduction of a new type of drama, *lakhon phud* (spoken play) in the reign of King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI, 1910-1925). In fact, according to historical record, *lakhon phud* was actually staged in Siam for the first time in 1879, in the Royal Palace, by King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V) – not by his son, King Vajiravudh – as it is widely believed. The first production of *lakhon phud*, though there is no record of the name of the production, was an experiment by King Chulalongkorn after the Western model. The King had the spoken play performed by amateur volunteer actors, most of whom were members of the royal family and noblemen.¹⁶ There is, however, no record of further experiments of this modern genre of drama after the first stage production. It seems that the local audience was not yet ready to appreciate this directly imported Western style of drama. Crown Prince Vajiravudh revived it again in a more complete form after his return from England in the late 1890s.¹⁷ By that time, Siamese audiences already had some experience of Western inspired creations of dance drama such as *lakhon dukdamban*, *lakhon phan thang*, and *lakhon rong* in which realistic acting and colloquial prose dialogue started to play a more important role.

¹⁶ Damrong-rajanuphab, p. 198.

¹⁷ Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 151.

Through King Vajiravudh's writing, and producing, of Western style plays, he introduced many new ideas, concepts, modern theatrical forms, and techniques first in direct translation and adaptation, and then, eventually, in the creation of his own plays. In relating drama to the education of the people and the socio-political development of the country, the themes and subjects of the King's *lakhon phud* (spoken drama) are usually about domestic and social values and political issues concerning duty, responsibility and loyalty to the nation and to the king. Each play ends with a moral lesson or a speech by a main character emphasizing moral virtues, national obligations, and sacrifice for the country and the monarchy.¹⁸ King Vajiravudh was without doubt a major force behind the promotion of Siamese drama and the development of *lakhon phud*. Indeed, his reign is regarded by many scholars as a 'golden age' of Siamese drama.

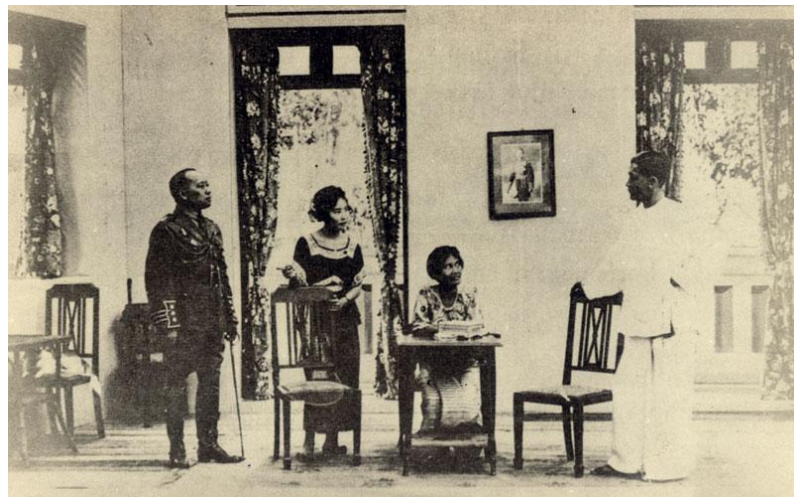


Figure 10 – King Vajiravudh in one of his *lakhon phud* productions

¹⁸ Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 159.

Chapter VI

The Development of Thai commercial theatre and modern drama after the major political revolution in 1932

Historical Background

After the death of King Vajiravudh in 1925, there was a period of major political change in Siam. In the reign of King Prajadhipok (1925-35), King Vajiravudh's younger brother who ascended to the throne, the whole country encountered a serious financial crisis which had started in the former reign due to a combination of World War I and the drought that had attacked the country. The new king initiated a new economy policy to cut down the number of his staff and to dissolve some inessential royal departments. The court performances, under the guidance of Krom Mahorasop (or the Department of Royal Entertainment), now regarded as profligate and wasteful, ceased. This period of the decline of court dance drama was sometimes regarded as the 'Dark Age'. A large number of court dancers and dance masters of the royal troupe were laid off and had to seek for jobs in private dance troupes outside the court. However, the ending of court dance drama did not produce a similar impact on dance drama outside the court. On the contrary, it encouraged the growth of commercial theatre business when, as aforementioned, there were many court dancers and dance masters who now worked for the private theatres.

The situation, however, did not last longer than a decade. A major political change took place on 24 June 1932 when a coup, which consisted of a small group of soldiers and civil servants who called themselves Khana Ratsadon (the

People's Party), successfully seized power from King Prajadhipok and insisted that the King accept a new role under the constitution. The country was then officially changed from absolute monarchy to constitutional government. The name of the country was also changed from Siam to Thailand. As a result, court dance drama, which was already in decline, was now shifted to be officially under the bureaucratic system and strict control of the government. In other words, the role of the court dance drama tradition, which used to symbolise the court as a centrality of power and prosperity, was diminished and gradually became more a feature of national heritage. However, drama and theatre still played the same vital role in this changing scene of socio-political circumstances. The new constitutional government also began to propagate their political ideas within central urban areas by making use of 'modern' drama as an effective tool. The period of major political change after 1932 thus marks another significant step for the development of Thai modern theatre.¹

Mattani Ratnin shares her viewpoint on the impact of political revolution in 1932 on the development of Thai theatre, writing that it has eventually transformed the aesthetic worldview of Thai dramatic arts, particularly the traditional norms and values.² In order to transform Thai society, which for a long time had been directed by an absolute monarchy, the new government found an urgent need to plant a seed of 'new culture' which was no longer exclusively confined within the circle of the upper class but could be shared in a wider sphere by the commoners. One way to do so was to overstress the fact that the 'old

¹ Kittisak Kerdarunsuksri, 'The Transposition of Traditional Thai Literature into Modern Stage Drama: The Current Development of Thai Theatre' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2001), pp. 48-9.

² Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p.119.

culture' was meant to serve the privileged few, which resulted in a broader gap within the society. The new government also stated that court performing arts were too costly and extravagant for them to continue to support them. Artistic forms created under the new socio-political conditions were designed to serve the common people in conformity with the government's policy.

Not only was court drama diminished, popular and folk drama outside the court were marginalised and some were entirely prohibited. Some new decrees regarding control of the performing arts were issued by the military dictatorship government, with tough punishments for those who performed against them. These new decrees caused a lot of confusion after they were legally enacted. It was the first time that any public performance by traditional theatres, both court and popular types throughout the country, needed to receive a licence from the Department of Fine Arts to be able to perform. In addition, the Department set out licensing rules and performing rules for music and drama theatre, and was required to provide 'proper' training for performers. Professional artists and the artist-to-be were required to attend a training program and pass an exam to be 'qualified' performers. This law even stressed a clear division between state/official culture and folk/popular culture. It also indicated that the realm of popular culture was under-going a process of colonisation by the absolute power at the centre.³

The new government introduced Western drama into society in a systematic way. Western drama was made into the official standard of aesthetic

³ Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, 'Cultural control and globalized culture', Online article published by Faculty of Communication Arts, Chulalongkorn University, May 2000
<http://www.freedom.commarts.chula.ac.th/articles/MCSU01-Cultural_control_and_globalized_culture.pdf> [accessed 12 October 2009], pp. 5-11.

values and has stood ‘at the heart of the power [...] as the discursive practice for a new nation-state culture’.⁴ However, without the key figures who had profound knowledge of both traditional and Western art forms, Western popular culture was promoted and replaced the ‘outdated’ and ‘uncivilized’ forms of traditional drama. By this act, damage was inevitably done to traditional performing arts as it caused commotion and confusion among court artists. Also, it distorted traditional art and shaped it into some new hybrid artistic form which was hardly characterised as Thai or Western.⁵

Luang Wichit Watakarn’s plays: shaping new dramatic aesthetics

After the 1932 revolution the new commoner-led government proposed an even more intense regime of civilized respectability than that which had existed in the period of absolute rule.⁶ Under Prime Minister Field Marshal Phibun Songkhram or, in short, Phibun (1938-44 and again in 1948-57), the new National Cultural Project, which was commonly known as the ‘Nation Building’ project, was put into action. The aesthetics of civilized respectability, first introduced by the absolute monarchy during the colonization period in the late-nineteenth century, were newly systematized as a part of the ‘Nation Building’ project into a legally enforced code or ‘cultural mandate’ laid down by Phibun’s government.⁷ It is interesting to notice that the political philosophy and the actual practice of

⁴ Siriyuvasak, p. 5.

⁵ Ratnin, ‘Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng’ [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p. 119.

⁶ Jackson, ‘The Performative State: Semi-Coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand’, para. 36.

⁷ Ibid., para. 37.

Phibun's government created the impression of paradoxical ambiguity. Despite their fundamental ideology of extreme nationalism, these political projects reinforced the westernization policy even more intensively than before. The impact of westernization was now not confined only within the elite group but also influenced all classes of people in society in almost all aspects of their lives. Some new ideas introduced by the government were overly Western so that people felt uncomfortable and embarrassed to follow them. For example, one official announcement found in the Government Gazette on 'The Act of Spouses' dated 16 March 1943 stated that a husband must honour his wife by giving her a kiss before leaving home to go to work and after coming back from work everyday.⁸ The attempt of the government to 'civilize' the nation somehow became the subject of absurdity and ridicule which brought about negative attitudes towards the government. However, according to Peter A. Jackson, these westernization projects were no longer oriented towards a Western audience as used to be the case while the country was newly open to the West – in order to build an image of civilized respectability as in the West. The image of 'civilization' 'was now used to represent the constitutional regime's right to rule in the place of the absolute monarchy'.⁹

The impact of these new political projects on drama and theatre was immense. In 1933 the government established the Fine Arts Department (Krom Sinlapakorn, hereafter, FAD). This department, during the absolute monarchy, mainly took charge of training and staging court dance drama. Now, when it was

⁸ Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p.119 [consulted The Government Gazette of Thailand, Volume 60, Part 15]

⁹ Jackson, 'The Performative State: Semi-Coloniality and the Tyranny of Images in Modern Thailand', para. 37.

shifted to be under the control and guidance of the Ministry of Education, it was responsible for all national cultural activities and performances not only court drama.¹⁰ The prime objectives of the FAD were to improve upon the standard of Thai drama to a universal level, to conserve what was available and to transform the performing methods to suit the modern era.¹¹ The first Director-General of FAD was Luang Wichit Watakan (henceforth Luang Wichit) whose works under the 'Nation Building' policy, with Phibun, shaped the new dramatic aesthetics in Thailand. To devise the national image of civilization through nationalist ideology, Luang Wichit exploited theatre as a major tool. It is obvious that Luang Wichit was well aware of the power of popular entertainment particularly drama and fiction. He once gave a public lecture stating that

It should be understood that popular fiction is very useful and is an extremely powerful tool for persuasion. Look at the revolutionaries, those who wish to change the hearts and minds of the masses. They do not write books. They write novels and plays. [...] Therefore, novels and plays are very powerful. They conquered the hearts of the people.¹²

To 'conquer the hearts' of Thai people, Luang Wichit took this opportunity to create his own theatrical style to convey the message of nationalism and of a new national culture. These ideal modern national plays were commonly known as Luang Wichit's 'patriotic drama'. Traditional styles of

¹⁰ Kerdarunsuksri, p. 59.

¹¹ Siriyuvasak, p. 5.

¹² Luang Wichit Watakarn, lecture on playwright and drama, 18 July 1956. See more in Siriyuvasak, p. 3.

drama based on presentational and improvisational conventions were now considered unsophisticated. Luang Wichit considered that the traditional court drama was too refined and slow moving, while folk theatre outside the court was too crude and vulgar, to be able to represent appropriate Thai artistic culture and the image of the 'civilized' country.¹³ To invent his own dramatic style, Luang Wichit borrowed some successful elements from both traditional and Western theatres in a similar way to some theatre practitioners before him who had experimented with *Lakhon Dukkamban* and *Lakhon Rong*. However, Luang Wichit's style was more direct and tended towards Western style more intensively than ever. In the article 'Cultural control and globalized culture', Ubonrat Siriyuvasak describes the grandeur of the performance of Luang Wichit's patriotic drama as

[...] the highlight of the national theatre. When compared with court theatre their new aesthetic quality differed in the sense that they were based on the Western performing technique of realistic acting. And the pace of the diction and movement were quickened (shortened) as part of the technique to modernize the theatre.¹⁴

Although Luang Wichit exploited the main elements of Western drama such as speaking dialogues and realistic acting, he still believed that singing and dancing remained the vital elements to attract Thai audiences. Music and songs, which were found in all Luang Wichit's plays, helped to carry his patriotic

¹³ Kerdarunsuksri, pp. 61-2.

¹⁴ Siriyuvasak, p. 14.

message effectively. However, his plays are not usually categorized as of the musical genre but as plays-with-songs in which songs are a non-omissible element yet not the exclusive tool to develop the plot.

The central theme of all his plays was to reinforce the idea of nationalism so melodramatic and love themes, which had long been in favour of Thai audiences, lessened in their importance. The primary sources of his plays came from history and local myth as these 'could be effective insofar as they could be turned into historical fact, if properly presented and built into a real historical context'.¹⁵ The nationalistic message in Luang Wichit's plays was successfully presented to Thai audiences mostly in the form of tragedies. Aiming to arouse the audience's patriotic emotion, most of the plays ended with the death of the hero who courageously sacrificed his life for the nation and for justice.

Today, Luang Wichit's patriotic plays are rarely staged in the Thai popular theatre. This is probably because the nationalist message through his plays no longer serves the Thai contemporary socio-political context. However, his nationalist songs are still popular and have been performed frequently whenever there is a need to arouse a sense of national unity and patriotism.¹⁶ In terms of shaping the dramatic aesthetic concept, Luang Wichit's new form of drama should be accredited in transforming traditional Siamese theatre, which had long been under the court's artistic tastes and direction, to become more accessible to theatre practitioners and audiences outside the centre of power. The taste of the Thai audience, therefore, was shaped and moved towards Western forms with fast-paced movement in the story, naturalistic acting and realistic theatrical elements.

¹⁵ Kerdarunsuksri, p. 60.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

The beginning of commercial theatres in Siam

The lack of written records makes it difficult to trace the history and gain a complete picture of the continuous development of Siamese commercial theatre outside the court culture. Commercial theatre troupes of the common people are believed to have existed since the late Ayudhya period (1656-1767), but only in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries did commercial theatre appear to form a new dramatic aesthetic outside the court standards. This was mainly due to the emergence of the middle class as a result of the major change in politics, the expansion of trade, and Western education. The middle-class people as active new owners and a new audience of commercial theatre developed their own concepts of arts which were not restricted to the court tradition. They were also wealthy enough to become major supporters for theatrical activities. This new group of audience was inclined toward popular tastes, more entertaining and topical theatre, and new ideas from Western culture.¹⁷

Before the first proper permanent playhouse, 'The Prince Theatre', was built in Bangkok in 1883, playhouses had never existed in Siam. Both court drama and popular drama outside the court were performed on a temporary set-up stage. Popular drama, in particular, paid no attention to having a permanent playhouse due to the fact that the players had to keep moving from place to place to perform in different villages. Some performers were farmers who acted only during the dry season when there was no work to be done in the fields. They mostly performed in public or community venues such as a temple's grounds. Traditionally, most troupes performed for free, without collecting tickets from the audiences, as they

¹⁷ Witayasakpan, p. 39.

were already paid or hired by someone in the village who needed a professional troupe to entertain the villagers for their celebratory occasions (such as a wedding ceremony, house warming, or Buddhist ordination). In this sense, drama was part of a larger festive occasion which the host provided free entertainment to entertain his/her guests. On some occasions, the troupes performed, again for free, in exchange for food, lodging, and/or a little money (when no one had officially hired them to perform).

The idea of purchasing tickets to see a show was then totally alien in Siamese culture. When *lakhon dukdamban* and *lakhon rong* (singing drama) gained more popularity, the idea of erecting a permanent playhouse to host a performance was initially considered. ‘The Prince Theatre’ was the first permanent playhouse, owned by courtier and theatre enthusiast Chao Phraya Mahintarasakdamrong. The playhouse was originally meant to stage the works of his personal drama troupe which sometimes performed to the public. It opened to all types of audiences ranging from courtiers to commoners, under the command of the king, on auspicious occasions. However, when his drama troupe became more popular to the general public, there was some complaint from the aristocratic audience who

wanted to see [the show but] did not want to sit too closely to the lower class who wore stinking sweaty shirts or [came to the theatre with] half-naked body. [...] Ladies from noble families were disgusted by the idea that there might be some men sitting side by side to them. Because of these reasons, those ladies and gentlemen were willing to pay a fee [so they would be seated separately]. The

Prince Theatre [therefore] started collecting money from the aristocratic audience from this time.¹⁸

[My translation]

Commercial theatre in Siam therefore started to develop. Other courtier-drama enthusiasts who owned drama troupes saw ‘The Prince Theatre’ as a brilliant example so they built more new playhouses of their own to stage shows and sell tickets. The main objective was gradually shifting from maintaining court style dance drama for prestige, towards attending to popular tastes for income.¹⁹ The money from the business was spent in creating even more extravagant performances to attract more audiences. Having permanent playhouses is a significant milestone in the reformation of the cultural behaviour and attitudes of the popular audiences towards public performance. Siamese audiences in general had been accustomed to free access to public performance which required no commitment or continuous concentration on the performance. Traditionally, audiences were allowed to chat, eat and drink, and walk freely in and out the performance venue anytime they wanted. As one episode of the performance was long, and frequently ran from three to five or seven nights successively, the audiences lost their attention easily if the scene being staged was not particularly their favourite scene or the players were not skillful or charming enough to hold their attention. With the emergence of commercial theatre, the performance period

¹⁸ Siam Samai Memorial, Volume 2, 1884. See Patarawadee Puchadapirom, *Wattanatham Buntherng Nai Chart Thai: Karn Plen Plang Khong Wattanatham Buntherng Nai Krung Thep Por Sor 2491-2500* [Entertainment Culture in Thailand: The transformation of entertainment culture in Bangkok society from 1948 to 1957], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Matichon Public Co., Ltd., 2007), p. 38.

¹⁹ Witayasakpan, p. 42.

had to be shortened for practical reasons and commercial purposes. By the late 1920s, performances ran approximately three hours from 8-11 p.m.²⁰ Besides, performances were offered on a regular basis where people could attend any time of the year. They were no longer limited to festive occasions.

When theatre became a serious business and the audiences had to pay for tickets, as in Western culture, it became necessary for the public to learn theatre etiquette. They had to learn to concentrate on a play: which posed quite a real problem. To prolong the concentration of the Siamese audience, most theatre companies knew that they needed some stunning visual-audio effects rather than relying on witty playscripts. Most pure spoken dramas have never really attracted substantial audiences at their performances compared to the audiences attending performances in the musical genre. King Chulalongkorn once watched a new Siamese-Western style production which concentrated more on the spoken dialogue than the songs and the dance. He commented that:

Audiences were not attracted [to it] because they did not understand the plot. They had to listen carefully and concentrate. They could not even take a glimpse elsewhere otherwise they couldn't follow the story. We love to see shows where we can talk [...] see beautiful dancers and listen to music and songs. [If the play] is full of speaking, they [the audience] just do not like it.²¹

[My translation]

²⁰ Witayasakpan, p. 56.

²¹ King Chulalongkorn's personal letter to his queen consort Chao Dararassamee dated 24 April, 1910. See more in Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p. 94.

The fact that Thai audiences have a relaxed code of theatre etiquette, and love chatting during the performances, has been proved true to some degree even in a modern theatre of the twenty-first century. Pawit Mahasarinand, a prolific journalist and theatre critic, shared his irritating theatre experience with the Thai audience while attending an English musical production in Thailand in 2001:

A lady who sat next to me translated and criticized the play to her friend all the time. At the beginning of the show while the orchestra was playing the entr'acte most of audiences were still chatting to each other [...] All in all, Thai audience like us got to sing 'mai pen rai' [never mind]?²²

***Lakhon rong* and commercial theatre in Thailand**

No professional theatre troupes could be economically successful without paying attention to popular taste. With the long-established dramatic preferences of song, music and dance in Siam, a new popular dramatic form emerged in the twentieth century. This was *lakhon rong* or *lakhon pridalai* (singing drama) which has been described as 'being [of] mixed blood with dance-drama for the mother and opera as the father'.²³ During the period of political revolution in the 1930s, while traditional dance drama both in court and popular culture were discouraged, the Department of Fine Arts encouraged *lakhon rong* and *lakhon phud* (spoken drama) which were directly influenced by and developed from Western drama. The former type gained much more popularity than the latter (which was still too

²² Pawit Mahasarinand, 'Judprakai' [Ignite], *Krungthepraturakit Newspaper*, 15 March 2001.

²³ As described by one of the well-known writers and educators whose pen name was 'Khru Thep' (Master Thep). See more in Wittayasakpan, p. 49.

foreign to suit the taste of the Siamese public audience). The characteristics of *lakhon rong* were well-suited to the public taste, particularly of the middle-class audiences in urban area, as it combined some basic elements of traditional dance drama with Western theatrical techniques.²⁴ The popularity of *lakhon rong* lasted for over five decades (1910s-1950s) alongside the growth of commercial theatres. Indeed, *lakhon rong* and commercial theatre in Thailand during the 1930s-1950s went through a period of massive development and expansion, becoming a very high-competitive business.

However, traces of a dramatic tradition which was influenced by the court culture could still be seen, for example in the trend for using all-female casts as was conventionally practiced in court dance drama. The use of all-female dance troupes also prevailed in commercial theatre during the late-nineteenth and the early-twentieth centuries.²⁵ The reason behind the popularity of using all-female casts lay in the social norms and values of the time. Thailand was still a very conservative society. The use of all-female casts would minimize some awkward moments on stage, for example, in the performing of a love scene. The Thai theatregoers at that time may well have felt embarrassed and appalled to see romantic scenes played by male and female actors together. In this case, the use of all-female casts would be advantageous to both the performers themselves and to the tastes of their audiences. Phran Bun, one of the most prolific theatre practitioners and directors of many successful *lakhon rong* productions of the period explained:

²⁴ Kerdarunsuksri, p. 50.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

At that time most audiences were women. It was difficult to find male audiences.

If I used actual males and females, they [the audiences] did not only stop watching my performances, but their children were also not allowed [to come to my performance] to watch a man and woman kissing.²⁶

The actresses who were assigned to play the male leading roles were the megastars of the period. Apart from the fact that they enjoyed their popularity and fame, they were the leaders of fashion for the middle-class female fans who followed the trend by having their hair cut short and imitating the stars' behaviour and gestures, for example, learning to smoke a small cigar.²⁷

Mixed casts began to perform in commercial theatres in Thailand in the 1930s. It took time for popular audiences to accept this, even though mixed casts were not totally new in Thai theatre. Mixed performances had been a feature of court culture during King Vajiravudh's reign. In many of King Vajiravudh's spoken play productions, the King made use of mixed casts as in most of the productions he had seen in Europe.²⁸ Gradually mixed casts became more and more popular and in the commercial theatre, too, until they eventually replaced all-female casts completely by the 1950s.

At that time, musical and live theatre reached the peak of its success and became the principal form of Thai entertainment in urban areas. The competition among theatre companies was fierce. One way to achieve popularity was to keep

²⁶ Kerdarunsuksri, p. 56.

²⁷ Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p. 111.

²⁸ The king himself performed in some productions with the court lady actresses, some of whom later became his queen consorts.

producing new, spellbinding productions which could astonish the audience with spectacular visual elements including costumes, sets and lighting, as well as developing sound effects. The traditional old stories from Thai literature, in which the hero and heroine were gracious royalty, were replaced by stories that were more contemporary, mostly dealing with romance between middle-class characters (in keeping with the tastes of middle class audiences). New sources of plots were found both in Thai short stories, novels and history, and in foreign sources as these stories allowed the possibility of creating extravagant costumes and settings. Among the most famous productions were stories of Indian star-crossed lovers such as *Julatrikoon* and *Kammanit & Vassithee*, as well as the Chinese folk tale *Nang Phaya Ngoo Kaow* [*The White Snake Queen*],²⁹ and classic Western children's stories such as *The Little Mermaid*.³⁰ Although the taste of the Thai audience now inclined towards Western-style drama, the most popular themes were still the easily accessible type found mainly in tragic, romantic and melodrama stories. Playscripts were widely written and published as popular fiction, becoming a good business for publishing companies.³¹ There were also some attempts by some theatre companies to stage more thought-provoking plays, which represented and discussed current social issues, but most of these productions did not prove to be popular. One of the most renowned actresses of a leading theatre troupe of the period *Siwarom*, Suphan Buranapim, recalled:

²⁹ Ratnin, *Kwam Roo Bueng Ton Keaw Kab Karn Sillapa Karn Kamkap Lakhon Wethi*, [*Introduction to Stage Theatre Directing*], p. 19.

³⁰ Choosri Meesommon, *Kwa Ja Dai Pen Choosri* [*Until I Became Choosri*], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Dokya Publishing, 1991), p. 68.

³¹ Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p. 111.

[Our company] failed to make a profit and [the troupe members] were disheartened. However, since we opted to produce ‘market-plays’, the response from the audience was overwhelming. [...] Our production *Wanida* which was adapted from a popular [melodramatic] novel became a mega success. In every performance, we had to provide a lot of extra seats [to respond to the popular demand of the audience].³²

[My translation]

Most *lakhon rong* directors were also the playwrights and they always played the leading roles. They took charge of directing other actors, mostly by demonstrating the action and movement in a scene. Over-the-top acting style was acceptable as the stage was large and the audience watched from a distance. Although naturalistic acting was now a preferable style, most actors still performed by making use of a ‘ready-made’ action sets – for instance, a particular eye-rolling movement and hand gesture to represent anger or sadness – rather than by developing true inner feelings. Unlike the dance drama in which the actors were not required to sing, *lakhon rong* actors had to be vocally trained in order to be able to sing clearly and loudly without relying on the help of audio technology. Interestingly, although actors memorized all the songs in the play, it seemed that most actors did not bother to make an effort to memorize their spoken lines. There was, therefore, always a script-teller, who sat behind the curtain or offstage

³² Puchadapirom, p. 221.

unseen by the audience, to give them the lines.³³ Well-known actors were in popular demand as they could, without a doubt, guarantee box-office success. Each theatre company went to great expense to get the most well-liked actors to play for the company.³⁴

Live theatre in Thailand declined after World War II, and by the late 1950s popular audiences turned to western cinema. This situation lasted for at least two decades. Most permanent playhouses were turned into movie theatres; actors and actresses from *lakhon rong* theatre troupes also turned to finding acting jobs in the film and television businesses instead. Live theatre which was still performed and seen in provincial areas was the local dance drama (commonly known as *Likay*). When there was a revival of interest in other theatre, it came in the form of ‘modern theatre’ and it began within universities.³⁵

Modern drama and university drama: the new beginning of modern day commercial theatre

Chulalongkorn University

A milestone in the development of Thai drama was marked by Sodsai Phanthumkomol, a graduate in Dramatic Arts from California University at Berkeley, in the United States of America. Sodsai also had some professional acting experience in Hollywood. She introduced Modern drama into Thai theatre

³³ Ratnin, *Kwam Roo Bueng Ton Keaw Kab Karn Sillapa Karn Kamkap Lakhon Wethi*, [Introduction to Stage Theatre Directing], p. 19.

³⁴ Puchadapirom, p. 217.

³⁵ Modern theatre, or modern drama, refers to the Western-style drama which emerged in Thailand during the late-nineteenth century.

in the mid-1960s when she began her teaching career as a lecturer in the English Department at Chulalongkorn University. In 1964 Sodsai staged an English production of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* as part of the English literature curriculum. This production marked the starting point of the introduction of dramatic arts studies at university level.³⁶ Initially, the drama course was opened as a minor subject, but it was upgraded to a major subject when the Department of Dramatic Arts was established at Chulalongkorn University in 1971. Under Sodsai's supervision, the department aimed to promote, and raise the standard of, performing arts in Thailand to the same level as that of the West. However, the early years of its establishment were a struggle. The idea of studying drama and theatre in order to pursue a career in the theatre business was unimaginable as most people still had a low opinion of a career in the entertainment business. 'Ten Kin Ram Kin' [literally means 'dance to eat' or 'dance to earn one's living'] was a common term of offence used to describe the nature of a performing career in which the players had to 'dance to feed themselves'. 'Any students who wanted to study in the field had to beg their parents to allow them to learn' [My Translation], Sodsai recalled.³⁷ This negative attitude towards performing arts as a career with no life security and respectability has been gradually changed since drama and modern theatre have become an accepted academic subject in the university curriculum, starting from

³⁶ Sasithon Ratchanee na Ayuthaya, 'Kwa Ja Pen Wan Nee' [Before Today Has Come], *Young Sodsai [Still Shining]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Department of Dramatic Arts Chulalongkorn University, 1994), p. 20.

³⁷ 'Sodsai Panthumkomol: Special Interview', *Praew Magazine*, Vol. 637, 10 March 2006, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Arun-Ummarin Printing, 2006), p. 191.

Chulalongkorn University and later spreading to other universities across the country.

Sodsai (Vanij-Vadhana) Phanthumkomol is now highly regarded among groups of Thai theatre practitioners as one of the most significant figures and is the force behind the development of Thai 'modern drama'. The term 'modern drama' in this sense mainly refers to the concept of acting introduced by Constantin Stanislavski which has become a major influence in Western theatre particularly in Europe and North America until today. Being educated as a young theatre student in America, Sodsai brought with her, on her return to Thailand, the knowledge of Western theatre and, in particular, Stanislavski's concept of acting – which was to change the face of Thai theatre tremendously. A large part of Sodsai's book, *The Arts of Acting (Modern Drama)*, published in 1995 in the Thai language, is devoted to giving in-depth explanations and examples of Stanislavski's idea of 'subtext' – the inner unspoken thought or the motives of the character which can be distinguished from the outward statement. In Western theatre, this idea of 'subtext' helps the actors provide 'the very flesh and blood',³⁸ of the theatre. With 'subtexts' in mind, actors will be able 'to give life to [the] text as if what their characters think matters, not only what they say and do'.³⁹ In Thai theatre, this approach was to show a new path that would transform Thai drama into the 'modern' form.

Sodsai not only introduced Stanislavski's idea of 'subtext' as the new method of modern acting, she also staged many Western plays in Thai to

³⁸ John Russell Brown, *New Sites for Shakespeare: Theatre, the Audience and Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 174.

³⁹ Brown, p. 174.

demonstrate how the inner consciousness of an actor could be portrayed effectively on stage.⁴⁰ Although all of her productions were done as university projects, performed by theatre students cast with minimal settings, most of the productions succeeded in showing to the audiences that when actors believed truly in the roles with clear inner motives or ‘goals’ in mind, they could put truth into their performances and make the acting very realistic and convincing. In recognition of her contribution to theatre studies in Thailand and her life achievement in dramatic arts, she has been presented with an honorary doctorate in arts from Chulalongkorn University in 2010.⁴¹

Sodsai, or ‘Khru Yai’ (Big Master) as she is widely called by her students, is also one of the Shakespeare enthusiasts and has an ardent love of Shakespeare’s plays. During her college years at the University of California in Los Angeles, she studied Shakespeare and was graded with distinction in the subject. Little surprise, then, that upon returning to Thailand, apart from her active years in setting up the drama department and laying the theatre arts curriculum, she was also in charge of teaching Shakespeare for the English Department. One of the most memorable moments in her Shakespeare class, recalled by most of her students, is her impressive performance of the roles of the three witches from Macbeth:

⁴⁰ Including, *The Glass Menageries* by Tennessee Williams in 1970, *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello in 1974, *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen in 1975, *The Stronger* by August Strindberg and *With All love I Hate You* by Linda Mitchell in 1977, *The Good Woman of Setzuan* by Bertolt Brecht in 1979, *Ondine* by Jean Giraudoux in 1982.

⁴¹ ‘The Art of Theatre: Sodsai ‘Sondi’ Panthumkomol receives an honorary doctorate degree in arts’, *Bangkok Post Newspaper* (Online article published: 25 July 2010) <http://www.bangkokpost.com/print/187776/?awesm=fbshare.me_AQIL5> [accessed 30 July 2010], para. 2 of 19.

Whatever they may or may not remember of English literature, none of her students will ever forget Khru Yai practically performing *Macbeth* for them at the front of the lecture room, assuming a different voice for each character, especially the cackling witches around the magic cauldron.⁴²

Surprisingly enough, even though Sodsai taught Shakespeare and also staged many Western script-based plays for more than thirty years of her teaching career, she never staged a single Shakespeare production. However, the ardent passion for Shakespeare's plays, which has been reflected through her impressive teaching style, was passed on to her students, one of whom later became a dramatic arts lecturer and translator – Nopamat Veohong. Nopamat is now an associate professor in the Department of Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University. She is also a professional translator who has translated many English-language novels, documentaries, and plays. Among her playscript translations are four of Shakespeare's plays: *Macbeth* (published in 1994), *Twelfth Night* (published in 1995), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (unpublished), and *The Tempest* (unpublished). Three of her published and unpublished Shakespeare translations namely *Twelfth Night*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* were staged at Chulalongkorn University in 1989, 1997, and 2007 respectively.⁴³

⁴² 'The Art of Theatre: Sodsai 'Sondi' Panthumkomol receives an honorary doctorate degree in arts', para.7 of 19.

⁴³ The production of *Macbeth* based on Nopamat's translation is announced to be staged in June 2011 on the opening of the new theatre auditorium at the Department of Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The project will be directed by Nopamat Veohong herself, while the role of the First Witch will be played by the prestigious theatre practitioner, Sodsai Panthumkomol.

Thammasat University

Meanwhile, in the 1970s, Mattani Rutnin who holds a doctoral degree from the University of London, initiated theatre studies as part of the English literature curriculum at Thammasat University, another top university in Bangkok, in 1971. The Department of Performing Arts was established there in 1978 and offered drama as a major subject from 1986. Examples of the productions at Thammasat University, directed by Mattani, are Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁴⁴

University productions at Thammasat University were different from those at Chulalongkorn University in the way in which they attempted to stage productions with the perfect balance of using Western and Thai theatrical elements. While Chulalongkorn University staged productions in direct translation, Thammasat University's productions were more experimental in adapting Western plays to suit the Thai social context. Moreover, Thammasat University's productions also encouraged the hybridization of traditional and modern theatre and made use of traditional techniques such as dance drama's form and gesture, and traditional puppet-theatre. One of the most well-known examples of Thammasat University's productions directed by Mattani was the production of *Butsaba Rim Thang E-san* in 1979. Mattani brilliantly adapted Alan Jay Lerner's *My Fair Lady*, based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, to a Thai version. She altered the cockney accent of Eliza Doolittle, a florist girl at Covent Garden in London, to the E-san or north-eastern Thai accent of Sa

⁴⁴ Kerdarunsuksri, p. 67.

Sungdoi, a lower class girl selling garlands around Sanam Luang (the Phra Men Ground) and Pak Khlong Talat (the flower market) in Bangkok. Mattani chose this accent deliberately as it sounds funny to Bangkok people.⁴⁵ The production was a big success. Mattani's adapted script was published and was re-staged many times by different theatre companies and in many school productions until today.

There has been very little attempt to write original plays with the exception of a few short ones by amateurs most of which are unsuitable for staging. The theatrical production of these activists in university was usually presented in the style of minimalist theatre in which complicated and elaborated theatrical elements, such as setting, lighting, and sound were not required. The theatres in this cases are usually classrooms or auditoriums within the universities and the shows are attended mostly by students and families and friends of the theatre groups. The intellectual nature of the plays chosen by this group limits the audience. The circle is therefore very small. The popular audience still prefers film and television soaps.⁴⁶

The introduction of theatre studies in Thai universities marked a significant chapter in the development of Thai commercial theatre. It is no exaggeration to say that most of the key figures in Thai theatre today are the products of the drama training programmes of these two leading universities. Some became scholars or trainers in other universities. Some entered the entertainment business in theatre, television or films as producers, actors, and

⁴⁵ Mattani Ratnin, *Butsaba Rim Thang E-san [My Fair Lady E-san]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thammasat University press, 1990), pp. (3) -(5).

⁴⁶ Ratnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand: The Process of Development and Modernization*, p. 198.

directors with the power to determine the direction of the Thai entertainment business today.⁴⁷

Commercial Theatre in Thailand from the 1980s to the present day

Live theatre in Bangkok by the 1980s found new venues apart from the common playhouses and university auditoriums to stage their productions. The new popular venues to stage modern spoken drama were some first class hotels in Bangkok. It all began when Mattani Ratnin staged some of her university productions in a first-class hotel for charitable purposes.⁴⁸ This hotel-base performance promoted the new culture of theatre-going in Thailand, and theatre now came back to popularity among the middle-class urban audience as an alternative entertainment to films and television series.

By the end of 1984, the Monthian Hotel in central Bangkok officially opened the Monthian Thong Theatre which could be described as a small cocktail lounge theatre. The plays staged here were performed late at night; the show started around 10 p.m. and ended by midnight. The target audience was the urban middle-class who could afford the expensive tickets and a light meal or a drink while being entertained by the stage play. The venue was more like a small restaurant with separated tables and chairs and the stage was set up in the front. The nature of this cocktail lounge style theatre fitted perfectly well with the Thai audience's behaviour as, in the traditional theatre, it is common practice that the audience could eat and drinks while watching the play. For almost a decade, the

⁴⁷ Kerdarunsuksri, pp. 66-7.

⁴⁸ Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p. 170.

hotel-based theatre was a trendy entertainment which urban audiences sought after.

Most productions at the Monthian Thong Theatre were spoken plays and light comedies. As most of the contemporary producers were the products of university education, the productions leaned more towards Western adaptations to suit Thai social contexts. Among the most famous productions was Seri Wongmontha's *Chan Phu Chai Na Ya* [*Darling, I'm Really a Man!*]. Seri is a famous gay scholar who is also a drama enthusiast. He adapted the story of American gays in *The Boy in the Band*, to Thai gays. This production was so popular that it was re-staged within a short period of time, and was also reproduced in the form of a film. On average, each programme of the Monthian Thong Theatre ran for one or two months depending on its popularity. One of the marketing strategies in attracting audiences was the use of stars from television and film. New performers were also introduced to the stage, and some later became stars in television drama. Among the new aspiring playwrights who wrote for this hotel-base theatre, some continued this career, as respectable playwrights and theatre company founders today. However, due to financial problems, after nearly ten years of a successful theatre business, Monthian Thong Theatre closed down permanently in 1993.

During the 1990s, theatre business continued with moderate success as public audiences now turned completely to the free entertainment of television drama or television soaps. Theatre productions produced by different new theatre companies are regularly staged. However, these are preserved as small-scaled productions staged mostly in small temporarily rented venues such as arts centres,

school auditoriums, and cultural centres. Among these troupes, each had its own style of presentation. Some troupes' productions focus on staging original plays ranging from children's drama, melodrama, thrillers, and situation comedy, to action comedy. Some troupes use only film or television soap stars in the leading roles as the main marketing strategy for every production. And some troupes' productions are mainly based on adaptations of traditional literature in modern theatre stylization. Despite the wide variety of style and presentation, it seems that most modern theatres focus more on the messages of the plays without using many elaborate and spectacular elements as in the traditional theatre style. The group of theatre-goers is still very limited within the educated middle-class in the capital city. It can be said that theatre in contemporary society seems to attract a minority audience who seeks artistic and sophisticated entertainment, in contrast to the mass audience appeal of television and cinema.

Only a very few commercial drama playhouses were built outside Bangkok; one of the biggest provincial theatres, the Kat Theatre, is located in Chiangmai, the biggest province in the north of Thailand. This theatre usually imported World famous musicals from the West, including *Grease*, *South Pacific*, and *West Side Story*⁴⁹ rather than producing its own work. Despite making a loss of thirty to forty million baht⁵⁰, the theatre owner is still running his theatre business in the hope of educating Thai people about the performing arts and

⁴⁹ *West Side Story* is, of course, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

⁵⁰ The Baht (or THB) is the currency of Thailand.

making them more and more appreciative of theatre arts both as performer and audience.⁵¹

⁵¹ Kerdarunsuksri, pp. 77-8.

Chapter VII

Shakespeare on the Public Stage in Thailand

Staging Shakespeare in the Thai Commercial Theatre in the 20th Century

It is widely acknowledged that, among prominent Western classical writers, Shakespeare sits at the centre of the literary canon as a symbol of high-culture, artistry, and intelligence. This image is sometimes closely bound up with the assumption that his works are far too intellectual and sophisticated to be appreciated by common readers with no strong background in English classics; let alone the readers from other parts of the world whose English language skill is even more limited. Shakespeare is now not only considered the greatest English playwright, but one way or another, he also grows into a semi-godlike icon. In Thailand the myth of his grandeur and his semi-divine image make it harder to draw the Thai reader and audience close to him.

The world-wide reputation of Shakespeare would have possibly been paid less attention in a small country like Thailand, where foreign literature has a substantially low level of readership, had he not been made well known by one of the most powerful figures of the nation, King Vajiravudh of Siam (1881-1925), who translated three of his plays almost a century ago. Introduced to Siamese readers by none other among the more celebrated translators than the King himself, Shakespeare, since then, has stood out among other Western classic writers. Shakespeare has apparently been branded as a representative of 'high-class' Western classics. His illusionary semi-divine image as the world's greatest writer was even more emphasized, with his name being attached to the most

prestigious translator of the nation. But instead of igniting interest in translating more of his works, it was the other way round. Thai translators in later generations shied away from translating Shakespeare, regarding his plays as far too difficult and too prestigious to translate, especially when they might be expected to follow in the footsteps of King Vajiravudh who adapted lavish yet very strict forms of Siamese verse to render Shakespeare in his translations. Little wonder then that for almost a century, there have been only a few attempts to translate Shakespeare into Thai, let alone to stage Shakespeare's plays in the Thai language.

It is interesting to note here that despite of the fact that King Vajiravudh's translations of Shakespeare are very well-accepted in the Thai literary circle and there is a common recognition of him as 'the father of modern Thai drama', none of King Vajiravudh's Shakespeare translations was staged completely during his reign. It seems that his translations were designed for the pleasure of reading them as literary texts not for practical staging. Although there is a record of the King's attempt, and preparation, to stage a complete production of his translation of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1917, the production had to be cancelled, due to a major flood in Bangkok in that same year.¹ But after that, there was no record of other attempts to stage Shakespeare again until the end of his reign in 1925.

Shakespeare was later moved from the court literary circle to the academic circle after the country encountered major political change in 1932 when the ruling power shifted from absolute monarchy to democratic government. By that time, educational reformation had been firmly established. The first few

¹ Pin Malakula, *Ngaan Lakhon Khong Phrabaat Somdet Phra Ramathibodee Srisintara Mahavajiravudh Phra Mongkutklao Chao Paendin Siam [Introduction to the Dramatic Activities of His Majesty King Vajiravudh]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thaiwattanaphanit, 1996), p. 251.

universities in Bangkok were properly founded during the mid-twentieth century; English language was one of the compulsory courses for every university student. Shakespeare, as the English cultural icon, is frequently mentioned and quoted in English textbooks; and especially for English Literature students, he is certainly positioned at the very heart of the subject. Little surprise then that Shakespeare's plays were more popularly staged for educational purposes in the university rather than for non-academic audiences in the professional popular theatre. Only over the past two decades or so have there been more attempts by modern theatre practitioners to stage Shakespeare; while a few Shakespeare translations also have been carried out in private, mostly academic circles, yet they have rarely been published.²

In general, Thai readers and audiences seem to have developed a fixed idea that Shakespeare is preserved only for selected groups of elites and university scholars, not for the popular audience. In order to appreciate, or to say the least, to understand Shakespeare, readers and audience are expected, in the Thai expression, 'Peen Kradai' which literally means 'to climb up the ladder'. This idiom is commonly used to illustrate the high-class image of Western arts which are regarded as too high for commoners and popular audiences who have limited opportunity to be directly exposed to those superior artistic experiences. It includes all kinds of Western art forms, not only classic literatures but also performing arts such as classical music, stage plays, ballet and opera. Shakespeare, without a doubt, carries with his name a sense of 'high-class' superiority. Metaphorically, in order to get a sense of his works, common

² Veohong, 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', p. 1.

audiences need a 'ladder' to climb up to where he is placed. It is also interesting to note here that even the word 'ladder' in this Thai idiom itself suggests an implication of the social-class gap between the high and the low in Thai society. By intentionally applying the word 'Kradai' which is a colloquial term frequently used by peasants, instead of the more formally used term 'Bundai', it emphasizes the belief that Western arts are definitely not for popular audiences, particularly those who lack tertiary education.

Although old language or archaic word-uses seem to be one of the foremost barriers for modern audience to appreciate Shakespeare's plays, the central themes in most of his plays make it easier to get close to him as they are still universal and unchanging. Shakespeare mostly writes about basic human emotions: love, lust, greed, ambition, jealousy, betrayal which are still touchable by audiences of all times. Although Shakespeare, during his time, wrote the plays to respond to the dramatic tastes and demands of a popular audience, modern theatres have the opposite idea and regard the need to please popular audiences as unnecessary for staging the Bard.

Staging Shakespeare in some parts of the world is not for the purpose of providing audiences with a popular entertainment. In Japan, for instance, where a huge number of Shakespeare's plays are staged each year, Shakespeare is not made to be 'easy to understand, easy to enjoy and easy to make good box-office' as Tetsuo Anzai states, it is rather to 'rediscover and experience afresh the most basic, the quintessential element of theatre.'³ Staging Shakespeare for the sake of

³ Tetsuo Anzai, 'Directing *King Lear* in Japanese Translation', *Shakespeare and the Japanese stage*, ed. by Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 125.

theatrical experiments and the discovery of artistic experience could take place in the countries where theatrical activities are highly engaged and encouraged both by state's policy and the public audience; so that the pressure of 'making good box-office' can be removed. However, it does not work that way in Thailand. The popular audience is still the most important factor which determines the future of theatre and its survival. In Thailand nowadays, the only stage performances which still exist by the strong support of the popular audience is from the folk musical theatres. Western style stage plays (broadly speaking, spoken stage plays), are not the centre of a Thai audience's interest. Western style theatres are limitedly conducted by professors and students in universities and by theatre practitioners of a few small theatre companies.

Thailand is not like Japan where professional theatres are given some space to disregard the need of 'making good box-office' and concentrate more on 'recovering the quintessential element of theatre' for the sake of the arts. Staging the Bard in Thailand in the present day, if not done in a university for educational purpose, is high risk due to the myth that he is too hard and too 'high'. But if we have an ultimate goal to promote Shakespeare's plays to a wider public audience outside the elite and scholarly circles and also to ensure good box-office possibility, then the study of Thai popular audiences and their dramatic perception and taste will become necessary and should be seriously taken into consideration by the production teams in order to figure out what exactly Thai audiences look for – so that we may find the theatrical elements in Shakespeare's plays which suit the audience's taste. The question about Shakespeare's relevance in contemporary Thai context may be also needed to be reconsidered. We may need to simply think

like the Bard himself while he was writing his plays almost 400 years ago – how to thrill the audience.

Macbeth the Traitor: Phagawalee Theatre Troupe (Approx. 1947-1956), based on Prapat Wattanasarn's translation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

After the political revolution of 1932, traditional dance-drama theatre, especially as created and developed by court artists, ceased to influence the performing arts circle. With new political rules and regulations issued by the new commoner government, and the rise of middle-class people, Western aesthetics were promoted and gradually transformed the Thai audience's taste to lean more towards Western standards. Theatre became more relevant to the contemporary lifestyle of the urban audience than ever before. Urban theatregoers came to theatre as part of their modern lifestyle, not as part of religious or state celebrations as in the old days. Traditional dance drama (with its styles based on presentational and improvisational conventions) was now considered unsophisticated and fell out of favour with the urban audience. Meanwhile Western hybrid forms of theatre, particularly the musical genre, became more and more popular.

The mid 1930s-1950s was considered the golden period of Thai-style musicals or *lakhon rong* – a combination of Western opera and Thai dance drama. Newly transformed from traditional dance drama, this style of performing arts became popular because it chose popular elements from various successful sources from earlier periods especially music and dance. Both elements were adapted to suit modern tastes with fast-moving plots, dialogue, musical tunes,

musical instruments, and a realistic acting style. Also in this period, commercial theatre troupes flourished with support from a wealthy urban middle-class audience who looked for new and exciting theatrical experiences. They also paid more attention to new story lines aside from their familiar old tales. As the competition among theatre troupes was fierce, each troupe thus had to try to produce new productions with a wide range of plots, ranging from sentimental drama to comic satire, from historical incidents to contemporary issues.⁴ Although most were newly written and dealt with contemporary situations, some were based on foreign sources. The records in the Thai National Library show that among the newly written scripts for *lakhon rong* in this period there are more than 700 stories.⁵

During World War II (1939-1945) foreign films, which had started to attract audiences away from live performance, were banned. *Lakhon rong* was then the only source of entertainment for the city audience. The competition among theatre troupes was fierce. Among the most celebrated *lakhon rong* theatre troupes, the Phagawalee troupe, which was founded by Ladda Saratayon, was distinctive and well-known for their adaptation of foreign plays into the Thai *lakhon rong* style. The important figure behind the success of this troupe was a very talented scriptwriter, Kumut Chandruang. Kumut originally came from a musical family. He was one of a few playwrights in that period who were educated in America.⁶ Kumut began his writing career in America as a journalist

⁴ Witayasakpan, p. 57.

⁵ Ratnin, 'Laksana Thai: Sillapa karn sadaeng' [Thai Characters: Performing Arts], p. 111.

⁶ He was the first Thai graduate in Political Science from the University of California, Los Angeles.

for newspapers and magazines. Most of his articles, for example ‘The Siamese Wedding’ in *Asia Magazine*, written in English about Thai culture and tradition, were the subject of interest for American readers; however, for some Thai public readers Kumut was not actually admired and welcomed. Kumut once revealed in his writing the negative response he received from Thai critics.

They accused me of permitting foreign readers to misinterpret our country and our people as primitive and barbarous.⁷

Kumut is also known for his English autobiography, *My Boyhood in Siam*, one of the widely-read books about Thailand and its culture written by native Thai writers. His exposure to Western theatre while he was studying and working in America equipped him well and gave him the inspiration to adapt Western techniques and combine them with Thai theatre. After eight years in America, Kumut returned to Thailand and began his career as a government civil servant in the Government Public Relations Department. Although he had a secure job working for the government, he did not give up his writing career but still wrote for Thai newspapers and magazines. Also, with his theatrical family background and close connection with a circle of theatre practitioners, he had convenient access to the Thai commercial theatre where he started writing scripts for a troupe called Phagawalee. Kumut’s taste in theatrical arts and his creations were in

⁷ Rong Wongsawan, ‘Kumut Chandruang Montree Lakhon (1)’ [Kumut Chandruang: The Mandarin of Thai Theatre (1)], *Silapawattanatham Magazine*, Thai Texts, 20, 12 October (Bangkok: Silapawattanatham, 1999), p. 65.

response to the public demand – grand, flamboyant extravaganzas.⁸ His first real success as a script writer was an adaptation of *Death Takes a Holiday*, which he named ‘Death in Disguise’. His adaptation of F. W. Bain’s *Livery of Eive* in fairy-tale style was another acclaimed production.⁹

His last attempt, and this signalled the end of *lakhon rong* all over the country, was an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* which he gave a Thai name, *Macbeth the Traitor*. During that period, as Thai commercial theatre flourished, each troupe was forced to produce new plays regularly to attract audiences. A lot of new productions were staged and each troupe had to change its programme regularly. Very few records about each production were found; the scripts were rarely kept and systematically filed for future reference. The production of *Macbeth the Traitor* by the Phagawalee troupe was no exception.

All we know about the production is that Kumut’s adaptation was based on the translation by Prapat Wattanasarn. Prapat translated *Macbeth* into two versions: a prose version and a poetry version. It was the poetry version for which Kumut asked permission from the translator to adapt it into a play. In the preface of his translation, Prapat writes:

Kumut Chandruang wanted to adapt *Macbeth* into a Thai stage production so he asked for my permission to adapt my translation. I thought that it would be useful so I gave him the script to produce a play. However, if all the scenes in my translation were strictly kept and followed, it would make successive productions [meaning: it would be too long to stage – my explanation], which is not suitable

⁸ Faubion Bowers, *Theatre in the East: A Survey of Asian Dance and Drama* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1956), p. 162.

⁹ Bowers, p. 162.

for a stage version. The producers thus had to delete and adapt many scenes. Some audiences who saw the play would like to read my complete original script so that they later asked me to have it published. Although I am aware that my translation was not an excellent work, I think having the script published would help increase the numbers of Thai books, which is another way to increase merit for the reading circle. So I agreed.¹⁰

[My translation]

There are very scarce written records about the production. Among them was that written by Chetana Nagavajara, a famous contemporary literary scholar and theatre critic. Chetana recalls his memory as an audience member who attended the theatre and saw the production of *Macbeth* at the Sala Chalermthai Playhouse in Bangkok when he was around ten years old. As this is the only written record about the production of Thai *Macbeth* found so far, it is useful to quote his words in full length:

In 2490s [Thai B.E. which is equivalent to the year 1947-1956], it was the time when stage performance including musicals was at its peak of popularity. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was staged in Thai. The production included songs which were newly composed for the production. I have to recall from the memory of a 10 year-old boy, but I think I can still remember that performance at Sala Chalermthai very clearly. The director was Ladda Saratayon who also starred in the leading role as Lady Macbeth. I think her acting was very intense and she was the most dominant character on stage. Lady Macbeth seemed to

¹⁰ Prapat Wattanasarn, *Macbeth*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Pra Chan, 1957), p. B.

direct everything that happened in the play. Also, the fate of other characters depended on her role and actions. I still remember the duel scene between Macbeth and Macduff which was very well choreographed. It was a very long scene as they fought from the lower stage up to the upper stage until Macbeth was defeated at the corner of the upper stage. Atisak Sawetanan played Macduff and Wasan Sunthornpaksin played Macbeth. For the music, Prasit Sillapabunleng was the music writer. I still remember one song which is the marching song of Macduff's army. Prasit's music style was something in between opera and musical styles. I noticed later, when I had an opportunity to see Richard Wagner's opera, that Prasit had borrowed some of Wagner's melody to write [his own musical version]. [...] The creator behind the production was Kumut Chandruang who had just graduated from America and was profoundly familiar to Western literature and drama. I would like to think that the Thai *Macbeth* production at that time was unique and held very firmly to the key message which only a 10 year-old boy could catch the point of. The interpretation of that production was clear enough to present that 'woman is the cause' in either positive or negative ways. But I was too young to be able to link Shakespeare's plays with the Thai political and social context of the time. But when I recall it right now, I guess that the troupe chose to interpret the play that way perhaps because they had something specific in their mind.¹¹

[My translation]

¹¹ Chetana Nagavajara, 'Hamlet Rue Kwam Lomlaew khong Udomsuksa Thai' [Hamlet or this is the Failure of Thai Higher Education], *Saimratsapdarwijarn*, 42, 2, 11-17 June 1995, Thai Texts <http://www.artbangkok.com/detail_page.php?sub_id=161> [accessed 2 June 2008], para. 5 of 13.

Until there is a certain proof of the first complete Shakespeare production in a Thai commercial theatre, I would like to believe that Phagawalee troupe's *Macbeth the Traitor* is the first complete Thai Shakespeare production ever staged in Thailand by professional theatre practitioners for business purposes, not for charity or educational purposes as was the case for some earlier productions. However, as the production was adapted and presented in a form of musical to suit public taste, it may suggest that Shakespeare's plays in their original spoken-play style may not fit well with Thai theatrical taste. The Thai audience still looks for basic elements like songs and music from a production. However, it can be noticed that the Thai audience is more open to different story lines aside from melodramatic and comedy types. The production of *Macbeth the Traitor* clearly demonstrates that serious tragic plays may also attract audiences to the commercial theatre.

Hamlet the Musical: Troupe 28 (1995)

It took more than forty years for another Shakespearean production to be staged in the Thai commercial theatre. *Hamlet the Musical* was the 'fat' production project¹² to celebrate the ten year anniversary of the troupe 28 – one of the most renowned theatre companies in the 1980s-1990s. Troupe 28 or the Khana Lakhon Song Paed was founded in 1985 by a group of university intellectuals in the hope of promoting stage plays to a wider audience and setting a high standard for performing arts in modern Thai theatre. The co-founders and

¹² Thai theatre critic Chetana Nagavajara uses this term to refer to Thai theatre productions which spend big sums of money and investment mainly for marketing purpose. The term somehow carries a negative connotation of the productions' lack of sophistication and lack of taste.

original members consisted of active and aspiring figures in different arts and entertainment fields such as television, film, literature, and advertising. With the perfect combination of talented members, Troupe 28, unlike other commercial theatre companies at that time, set up a systematic method of administration. The troupe made clear in the first place that their productions aimed to promote theatre as an educational tool and to promote the arts rather than for business reasons, so most of their productions were produced based on a partial business interest and on a non-profit making basis. Most of their productions were translations and adaptations of Western plays. In 1985, Troupe 28 staged its first production, translated from Brecht's *Galileo*, with great success; the following productions included *Biography: A Game*, *Don Quixote Man of La Mancha*, *The Visit*, *The Two-faced Man*, *Rhinoceros*, *The Prophet*, and *Hamlet the Musical*.¹³ The most acclaimed production of Troupe 28 was the Thai translation of the American musical *The Man of La Mancha* in 1987. The production marked a big step in Thai theatre towards an international production standard. In the past, most Western styled productions were enjoyed by small audiences. But Troupe 28's *The Man of La Mancha* was the first Western-based production which was hugely successful both at the box office and with the critics. A famous literary-theatre scholar and critic Chetana Nagavajara highly praised this semi-amateur, semi-professional production for its perfect balance of entertainment and intellectuality as well as the overall production quality: 'the calibre of Troupe 28 had reached an

¹³ Kerdarunsuksri, pp. 74-5.

international standard in terms of theatrical techniques, i.e., setting, lighting, and sound.’¹⁴

The great success of *The Man of La Mancha* brought about the next ‘fat’ project, *Hamlet the Musical*, in 1995. M.L. Pandevanop Devakula, commonly known by Thai audiences as Mom Noi, one of the most celebrated contemporary film and television drama directors, was in charged of the project as the play’s director. When asked why *Hamlet*? Mom Noi explained:

I’ve had this project in mind for years but things were quite unsettled back then. But fours years ago, I worked with Sarunyoo [Sarunyoo Wonkrajang, a famous television series, film, and theatre star who played Hamlet in this production – my explanation] in *The Prophet* production and felt that he would be perfect for the role of Hamlet. So I began to read the play again. I found many interesting points especially the fact that this play highlights the importance of theatre as a high-class form of art, as Hamlet says ‘for any thing so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature’¹⁵

[My translation]

Hamlet the Musical was staged for eight shows from 4-10 May 1995 at the Thailand Cultural Centre, the biggest performing-arts venue in Bangkok. The

¹⁴ Chetana Nagavajara, ‘Modern Musical: The Meeting Point between Thai and Western Traditions’, *Peur Kwan Yoo Rod khong Manussayasart: Ruam Bot Kwam Wichakarn* 2525-2532 [*For the Survival of Humanities: A Collection of Academic Articles 1982-89*], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 1989), p. 513.

¹⁵ M.L. Pandevanop Devakula, an interview in an unidentified Thai magazine (a photocopy kindly provided by Sarawanee Sukhumwat, the translator of *Hamlet the Musical* production)

production caught the media's interest from the beginning. Being called by many critics a 'fat' production for its big investment budget of at least two million baht, the production seemed a very promising project which included many talented figures in its production team. The translation was done by Sarawanee Sukhumwat, an English Language and Literature professor at Chiang Mai University. Mom Noi adapted the translated script and directed the production. The music director was a very well-known song writer, Danoo Huntrakul. The most effective marketing point, however, was the cast. Thai commercial theatre shares some common characteristics with the English Victorian theatre in the sense that the stars are the really important things in the play. In Victorian theatre, as Sir Walter Scott wrote at his time, 'it was no longer the poetry or the plot which drew an audience to *Hamlet* but the desire to compare some turn of gesture or intonation in Kemble's performance with that of Garrick.'¹⁶ So in Thai theatre the poetry and the plot have never really been the core magnets to draw the audience. The attention has always been the leading stars. Troupe 28's *Hamlet the Musical* included the biggest names in film and television like Saranyoo Wongkrajang and Sinjai Hongthai – Thai academy award winners – in the roles of Hamlet and Gertrude, despite the fact that they were both less-experienced as singers who would normally star in a musical.

Troupe 28 decided not to follow the Shakespearean tradition but created its own stylization and interpretation of Shakespeare's original version in order to broaden the opportunity for audiences from different backgrounds to get to Shakespeare in their own way. The production team decided to adapt

¹⁶ Fintan O'Toole, *Shakespeare is hard but so is life: A radical guide of Shakespearean Tragedy* (London and New York: Granta Books, 2002), p. 7.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to a musical production, as the most accessible form of Western theatre with which Thai audiences can easily connect. Sorwanee Sukhumwat, the translator of Shakespeare's script for the production, commented:

If we make a traditional *Hamlet* production with no music, the Thai audience will definitely not get it. Not only the Thai audience, some Western audiences today feel the same way. It is pretty boring. This is a similar situation to traditional Thai *Khon* [traditional mask dance drama] which is no longer popular among modern audiences. [...] We need to adapt the classic work to fit the modern context, otherwise it becomes just a museum piece or a dead work.¹⁷

[My translation]

Hamlet the Musical was written in a mixture of semi-prose and poetic style. According to the translator, translating the script into a complete poetic form (as in the early period) no longer fits with modern Thai contexts. It might also cause problems of miscommunication as a modern day audience is not accustomed to listen to long, poetic chanting. The production team thus relied on music and songs to represent the sense of Shakespeare's poetry.

It is interesting to note that while the Thai production of *Hamlet the Musical* claimed to be the first musical production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, in Japan there was also a claim of 'the first sung *Hamlet*' production which opened in Tokyo, coincidentally, in the exact same month and same year as the Thai *Hamlet* (May 1995). While the Japanese *Hamlet* (the Musical) 'suppressed by every means any aspect of Japanese culture or theatre and strove deliberately to

¹⁷ Sarawanee Sukhumwat, personal interview, 18 March 2009.

avoid showing a mixture of cultures’,¹⁸ the Thai production of *Hamlet the Musical* tried its best to fit *Hamlet* into the Thai contemporary social context. Indeed, according to some theatre critics, this production tried too hard and, to some extent, had taken a step too far with this experiment.

Bearing in mind the success of their last smash hit, *The Man of La Mancha*, among theatre critics, Troupe 28’s *Hamlet the Musical* received a much less enthusiastic response. Although the production was very successful in terms of the box office and was recorded as one of the most successful sold-out productions in Thai theatre history, the responses from the critics were somewhat mixed. Michael Denison from the Bangkok Post Newspaper referred to the production as ‘an interesting twist on a classic theme’, whereas Kitiarpha Khakam from the Krunghep Thurakit Newspaper called it a production that was ‘not-as-grand-as-it-may-seem’.¹⁹ One of the most vivid examples, and also the most controversial scene which gave rise to a hot debate among theatre critics about the proper extent of interpretation and acculturation, was the stylization of the ‘to be or not to be’ scene. While the whole story was presented as is traditionally found in Shakespeare’s original script, with the additions of songs to replace some dialogues and the deletion of some less significant scenes, the ‘to be or not to be’ scene was the only part of the whole play which was presented in a Brechtian ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ style. In this scene, Sarunyoo Wongkrajang, a television mega-star who played Hamlet, after delivering the lines of the famous soliloquy, ‘to be or not to be’, suddenly came out of character to be his own self. He then

¹⁸ Brandon, ‘Other Shakespeare in Asia: An Overview’, p. 36.

¹⁹ Wongtanong Chainarongsingha, ‘Interview with Mom Noi M.L. Pandevenop Devakula’, *GM Magazine*, Thai Texts (the photocopy of the text was kindly provided by Sorrawanee Sukhumwat, unknown year of publication), p. 87.

directly addressed and talked to the audience mentioning some current social issues that most city dwellers in Bangkok shared and experienced in common.

Sarunyoo: Dear audience, according to William Shakespeare's script which he wrote about 400 years ago, this is the big problem which Prince Hamlet has to encounter. He asks himself and ponders the question 'to be or not to be'. At least, the prince starts to question himself when encountering the problem. What about us? People living in the twentieth century, have we ever questioned ourselves about the problems we are encountering nowadays?

Chorus: (sing) The persisting problems

Sarunyoo: Traffic congestion that causes tardiness

Chorus: (sing) To be or not to be

Sarunyoo: Not enough money to pay the mortgage.

Chorus: (sing) To die or not to die

Sarunyoo: Democracy or dictatorship.

Chorus: (sing) To solve it or let it be

Sarunyoo: The toilet has been broken for over three months

[*Hamlet the Musical*, Act II Scene II, My translation]



Figure 11 – Sarunyoo Wongkrajang in *Hamlet the Musical*

According to Brecht's definition, the distancing-effect technique generally aims to 'prevent the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor', instead 'leading the audience to be a consciously critical observer.'²⁰ One way to make this work is the use of direct audience-address to disrupt the stage illusion. This was the technique used in this particular scene of *Hamlet the Musical*. The director, Mom Noi, gave an interview on this particular subject explaining that he intended to use the Brechtian technique in this important scene:

I would like to emphasize to the audience what 'to be or not to be' means in Thai society. I'm afraid that they [the audience] would so engage with Hamlet until they forget the main message of the story.²¹

With his theatrical experiment with the distancing-effect technique, Mom Noi was well aware of and prepared for the various responses from the audience. In theory, the audience would generally regard the scene as 'strange and even surprising',²² as they were suddenly brought back to the real world. This was an irritating surprise for some Thai audiences.

Among the critics who felt strongly disappointed with the production was a well respected literary professor and theatre critic Chetana Nagavajara. In his review article in a newspaper, Chetana viewed this production as an evident

²⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the development of an aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 91.

²¹ Chainarongsingha, p. 89.

²² Brecht, p. 92.

example of, ‘a failure of Thai higher education’. Chetana metaphorically referred to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as ‘the Everest of Western theatre’ which must demand great skill from theatre practitioners in order to achieve the proper level of interpretation and adaptation. As most of the production team were ‘university products’, Chetana even blamed himself and his intellectual university colleagues – the experienced Western literature professors – for ‘failing to lay the fundamental background in Western arts appreciation’ for their students:

Thai ‘hi-tech version’ of *Hamlet* is the product of the modern entertainment business in which money, technology and marketing strategies work hand in hand. I have mentioned many times that when money combines with technology, we have to be very cautious. No matter how hard I try to put the blame on the business circle, I and some of my folks [German language lecturers] felt that we are guilty and have failed as teachers. [...] [For] this Thai version of *Hamlet* exemplifies the failure of Thai higher education.²³

[My translation]

According to Chetana, Troupe 28’s *Hamlet the Musical* was weak in two main areas: the music and the interpretation. For the music, Chetana pointed out that in a musical, music and songs obviously play a vital role and are supposed to replace some unnecessary dialogue to make it clearer and more concise. The songs in *Hamlet the Musical* failed to fulfil this objective: ‘It is quite irritating that we [the audience] do not get the sense of the songs and do not understand

²³ Chetana Nagavajara, ‘Hamlet Rue Kwam Lomlaew khong Udomsuksa Thai’ [Hamlet or this is the Failure of Thai Higher Education], para. 3 of 13.

why some songs are added in some particular scenes' [My translation]. However, the production's music director, Danoo Huntrakul, clearly stated that there are no 'pop songs' nor easy-listening-style songs in this production, even though this is a 'fat' musical project which aims to please the popular market. For Huntrakul, the music reflected more on the personal artistic preference of the song-writer than being an attempt to please the popular taste:

I don't need to fix the style of the songs and music to please the market and audience. I chose what I thought fit the best with the style of the production as best I could. I don't care if audiences might not understand my style of music as long as the music can help convey the message and the emotion of the play.²⁴

[My translation]

Perhaps this is the main reason that Chetana confesses, 'Once I walked out of the theatre house, I couldn't even remember a single song from the play; while with Troupe 28's *The Man of La Mancha* production, I remember singing a theme song while walking out of the hall' [My translation].²⁵

Regarding the interpretation of the play, Chetana accused the production team for not trying hard enough to understand the original script before applying their modern interpretation and theatrical techniques with the result that they distorted the main message of the original play and made the Thai *Hamlet* 'an

²⁴ Danoo Huntrakul, an interview in an unidentified Thai magazine (a photocopy kindly provided by Sarawanee Sukhumwat, the translator of *Hamlet the Musical* production)

²⁵ Nagavajara, 'Hamlet Rue Kwam Lomlaew khong Udomsuksa Thai' [Hamlet or this is the Failure of Thai Higher Education], para. 6 of 13.

orphan in terms of cultures'. The 'to be or not to be' scene was strongly criticized by Chetana:

Troupe 28 did not put enough thought in deconstructing the 'to be or not to be' scene by having Hamlet complain to the audience about the traffic congestion in Bangkok. Some people told me that the 'alienation' technique by Bertolt Brecht was applied in this scene. [...] However, this 'alienation' technique cannot be applied anywhere in the play without thorough consideration. [...] I feel ashamed for myself and my German language lecturers who write a lot about Brecht and his theatrical techniques with no one paying attention to reading them. The ones who can read textbooks in foreign language do not pay much attention to adapting the knowledge into practice. I therefore have to get back to my same old point that this is because of the failure of Thai higher education, Hamlet therefore gets stuck in a traffic jam on Ratchadaphisek road [the road where the performance venue is located].²⁶

[My translation]

Despite the disappointing response from some critics, the fact that *Hamlet the Musical* was one of the biggest Shakespeare productions ever staged in the Thai commercial theatre, outside the university circle, with huge box office success deserves some credit. However, with the example of Troupe 28's experimental production whether good or bad, Thai commercial theatre returned to the safer options by responding to the popular audience's demand for basic melodrama or comedy plays. Troupe 28, after *Hamlet the Musical*, stopped

²⁶ Nagavajara, 'Hamlet Rue Kwam Lomlaew khong Udomsuksa Thai' [Hamlet or this is the Failure of Thai Higher Education], para. 9 of 13.

performing. The members were engaged in their own careers and soon dispersed. Indeed, since *Hamlet the Musical* in 1995, there has been no new ‘fat’ production of Shakespeare’s plays staged in a big performance venue. Shakespeare seems to have returned to a university environment. Only some small productions by student and amateur theatre groups have been staged from time to time. The attempt to make Shakespeare accessible to the Thai popular audience is still one of the most challenging tasks for Thai theatre companies. Shakespeare as ‘the Everest of the Western literary world’ has not yet been conquered by any Thai theatre climbers so far.

In 2007 the opening of Muangthai Rachadalai Theatre, the newest and best technologically-equipped commercial playhouse at the centre of Bangkok, marked another milestone on the Bangkok theatre scene. Many Thai audiences, most of whom are Bangkok residents, are thrilled by the idea that they now have a ‘Broadway-standard’ private-run playhouse. The theatre company, Scenario, now regularly stages spectacular musical productions, most of which are original adaptation of well-known Thai novels and folk tales. They also stage works in the venue by other companies, for example, Theatre 28’s Thai (re-staged) production of *Man of La Mancha* and imported touring English productions of *We Will Rock You*, *Chicago*, *Cinderella* and *Mamma Mia!*. This started the new trend of musicals in Thai commercial theatres. Scenario has succeeded in drawing the attention of the public and the media to grand-scale musicals. Elsewhere, with more small venues, more experiments in using physical movements and multimedia in theatre have been practised. With the ever increasing number of

productions, contemporary Thai theatre offers more variety than ever before though it still tends to avoid politics and sensitive issues.²⁷ This is a new start for twenty-first century Thai commercial theatre which aims to produce more and more intercultural productions to the same standard as the theatre seen elsewhere in the world.

²⁷ Pawit Mahasarinand, '10 Best Thai Theatre of the Decade', *The Nation*, 28 December 2009 <<http://blog.nationmultimedia.com/danceandtheatre/2010/01/31/entry-1/comment>> [accessed 28 January 2010], para. 5-7.

Chapter VIII

Shakespearean Productions in Thai University Theatres

Shakespearean productions were revived again on the Thai stage after a decade of inactivity affected by the post-Second World War depression, but Thai commercial theatre in the 1960s, particularly in the urban area of Bangkok and its vicinity, was overshadowed by imported Western cinema. Most playhouses which had once been used to stage live performances now became cinemas. Thai theatre practitioners also had to give up their stage careers and sought jobs in the newly-established television and film businesses instead. So, while commercial theatre encountered a ‘frozen’ period in its development, live performance under the façade of Western ‘modern drama’ was introduced in Thai universities. Shakespeare productions have been staged sporadically as small-scale productions by amateur groups of dramatic arts students in many universities and, in particular, in the two most scholarly and socially prestigious universities: Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University.¹

Chulalongkorn University productions

For Chulalongkorn University productions, the prestigious reputation as the first and the longest established school for dramatic arts and theatre studies makes their ‘student productions’ hard to ignore by theatre-goers and theatre critics even outside the university circle. Although most productions at Chulalongkorn University are based on direct translations of Western plays and

¹ See Chapter VI, pp. 186-93.

staged mainly for educational purposes, the quality of ‘student productions’ here is widely accepted by public audiences and theatre critics as no less professional than those of commercial productions. Under close supervision by theatre scholars and experts in different theatrical fields including directing, setting, lighting and costume design, most productions receive positive responses and reviews from audiences. Some of these productions also co-star famous film or television actors.

However, some limitations can also be found in these university productions. Apart from financial limitations, as are usually found in most student productions, one of the most obvious weak spots is the casting. According to the departmental philosophy, most ‘student productions’, despite the fact that some of them were directed or closely supervised by theatre professors, are staged for educational purposes, which means giving priority in casting to dramatic arts students. This policy, according to Nopamat Veohong, ‘though valid in its premise, narrows down the options for the “right casting”’.² Most cast members, who are aged between 18 to 25 years old, are not only evidently young in appearance but also lacking in stage acting experience. The choice of plays to be staged has to be carefully considered and selected to suit the age and (in)experience of the actors. In the case of staging Shakespeare in university productions, it can be seen clearly from the record in the past three decades that the most frequently staged of Shakespeare’s plays are *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. This is due to the fact that most of the main characters in these plays are young lovers who can be played convincingly by

² Veohong, ‘Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand’s Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies’, para. 14 of 31.

young actors. Also, certainly in Thailand, Shakespeare's comedies are always more popular choices than tragedies and histories. Thai audiences in general 'allegedly opt more for laughs and fun than tears and depth of meaning'.³ For Thai audiences who are familiar with the common dramatic elements for romantic-comedies – love at first sight and the unrequited love of young lovers, mistaken identity, cross-dressing and disguise, tricking and being tricked, word plays, supernatural powers performed by supernatural characters, and happily resolved ending – these three of Shakespeare's comedies make 'canonical' Shakespeare accessible for Thai audiences.

Hunsa Ratree (Twelfth Night production in 1989)

At Chulalongkorn University, four of Shakespeare's plays have been staged so far – *Hunsa Ratree (Twelfth Night)* in 1989), *Tam Jai Tan (As You Like It)* in 1991), *Ratree Nimit Klang Kimhun (A Midsummer Night's Dream)* in 1997) and *Payu Pirote (The Tempest)* in 2007); most of which were translated by Nopamat Veohong. These productions are direct translations not adaptations, however as Nopamat puts it, the productions come 'with remarkable premises for staging, production design, locality, time frame and performance venue'.⁴ Nopamat Veohong, in her paper 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', delineates in detail the three university Shakespeare productions in which she took part as translator and director. The three productions of Shakespeare's comedies – *Twelfth Night*, *As*

³ Veohong, 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', para. 3 of 31.

⁴ Ibid., para. 3 of 31.

You Like It, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – according to Nopamat, were conceived and transported in different time frames: the past, present and future. *Twelfth Night* was staged in outdoor, non-audio-equipped stage settings which recreated and brought the audiences back to ‘the glory of the past age’ of traditional Shakespearean theatre. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, although another direct-translation production, was placed in modern-day Bangkok with all the characters transformed into contemporary Thais, representing different social classes and careers. Last but not least, the production of *As You Like It* was set in ‘a never, never land’ in an unspecified period of time which Nopamat described as ‘a time that is yet to come, hence a futuristic timeframe.’⁵ All of these productions demonstrated the attempt of Thai theatre practitioners to ‘transport’ the content and messages of the playwright from Elizabethan England to 20th century Thai audiences.

In her paper, written in English, Nopamat explains how she was inspired to stage her first Shakespeare production, *Twelfth Night*, as an outdoor production without the help of electrical amplification – in a similar manner to Shakespearean productions in the Elizabethan period. The inspiration resulted from ‘what was earlier opined yearningly in a review’ of her first large-scale outdoor production of her translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in 1986.⁶ The production was a huge success and very well-received by Thai audiences and theatre critics. One of them was the most distinguished critic of the country, Dr. Chetana Nagavajara who, apart from his high praise for the overall aspects of the production, remarked on how the production ‘might have been even more enhanced, [...] provided that

⁵ Ibid., para. 31 of 31.

⁶ Ibid., para. 9 of 31.

it would be humanly possible to project vocally in such an open space, i.e. without amplification of hidden wireless microphones [...] to preserve the exquisite beauty of human voice'.⁷ To respond to the review, a few years later, Nopamat took up the challenge to stage another outdoor production, this time without assistance from any electrical amplification. Nopamat chose to stage Shakespeare's comedy, *Twelfth Night*, as she did not want to stage two tragedies in a row. The real challenge now fell to the responsibility of her novice actors who had been voice-trained vigorously to be able to project in an open-air venue.

The venue for the production of Chulalongkorn University's *Twelfth Night* was in front of the two-storey building which was used to house the Department of Dramatic Arts and its acting studio. Nopamat describes the building and settings which roused her imagination to stage the open-air *Twelfth Night* with the intention to recreate the atmosphere of Shakespearean theatre as follows:

The two-storied building was a conventionally-shaped oblong structure with two wings spreading out and a facade of huge columns flanking the entrance, over which perched a small balcony. [...] Platforms and flats were put up right in front of Building 3 of the Faculty of Arts, using its exterior facade as background. As there was a small balcony perched on the second floor of the building, I exploited the wonderful setting, incorporating it and putting the 5-musician orchestra in this area. Thus, when Orsino called for music in his opening lovelorn soliloquy, the court musicians appeared up there to feed him with his appetizing 'food of love.' They simply withdrew when dismissed by the Duke's abrupt changing mood for melancholic, tormenting love. The lofty position of the orchestra made for the

⁷ Ibid., para. 8 of 31.

dominant mood of the play which begins with and raves about music in relation to the mood of love.⁸

Similar to Shakespearean staging in The Globe, minimal props and sets were used so the changing of sets for each scene was not necessary. The action thus moved forward from scene to scene without interruption. Costume design for this production was another replication of the Elizabethan period. Most main characters who played young lovers were dressed in bright coloured outfits, while the comedians wore a bit more solemn-looking outfits with the exception of Feste, ‘the wise fool’ whose role was to bridge the dramatic and real worlds of the actors and the audience. Feste wore a multi-coloured coat.



Figure 12 – Chulalongkorn University’s production of *Hunsa Ratree*

Nopamat also notes some difficulties in the casting process for her *Twelfth Night* production, particularly the roles of identical twins of different sexes: Sebastian and Viola. Well aware of the almost-impossible mission in casting

⁸ Ibid., para. 10-11 of 31.

identical twins (who can act) within a group of theatre students, Nopamat finally decided to cast an 'odd couple' of 'a 176 cm., lanky young man of Chinese-origin for Sebastian and a 163 cm., Eurasian young woman for Viola/Cesario' based on their acting ability as the more important focus. She also notes that:

What was asked from the audience was a big-time suspension of disbelief, so they could possibly overlook the remotest of resemblance in physical features and statures and trust the words as uttered forth by the bewildered Antonio that 'How have you made division of yourself?/ An apple cleft in two is not more twin / Than these two creatures.' (Act V, Scene i) What was left to be done was for the magic of the theatre to work its wonder.⁹

With the major problem of the 'right casting' of the main characters, the production also cast the veteran stage actor, director, and theatre scholar Chonprakal Chandrueng in the role of Malvolio, the puritan steward tricked into believing that he was the object of affection by Olivia. The skilled actor Chonprakal brilliantly brought life to the character of Malvolio especially in the scene in which Malvolio was fooled into wearing cross-gartered yellow stockings and behaving strangely in the presence of Olivia. This scene, according to Nopamat, 'provided the highest note of hilarious comedy and helped prove that the recreation [...] of a period piece in authentic period costume poses no time barrier between the past and the modern-day audience in a different hemisphere from where it was conceived'. Against all the limitations in the production of *Twelfth Night*, Nopamat put her trust in 'the magic of theatre' to do the work with

⁹ Ibid., para. 14 of 31.

assistance from acting and stage techniques. As a result, ‘the magic’ once again ‘proved to be comforting’ as this outdoor production of *Twelfth Night* achieved rave reviews from audiences and critics.¹⁰ Chetana Nagavajara, the prominent theatre critic whose review of the earlier production was a real inspiration behind the current production of *Twelfth Night*, spoke highly of the play in many aspects. The translated script was, in particular, highly praised by Chetana:

[To produce] a spoken play has to start with the script. The success of the play depends on the quality of the playtext and the actors’ ability to interpret the text. In terms of the Thai translated script [of the *Twelfth Night* production], I would like to express my appreciation to the translator who attempts to find the most suitable Thai words which convey the sophistication of Shakespeare’s rhetorical style. [...] Although the translated text may not be able to deliver every single point of the sophisticated source text completely, this is not directly related to the translator. It is the problem in the ‘national level’, which means that perhaps the Thai language today is not rich enough to render Shakespeare’s rhetoric.¹¹

[My translation]

¹⁰ Ibid., para. 14 of 31.

¹¹ Chetana Nagavajara, ‘Kwam Lameard-lamai Thee Devalai Khmer’ [‘Great Delicacy in Khmer Devalai’], *Krun Kid Pinid Nuek [Immersed in One’s Thoughts]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Prapansarn Ltd., 2001), pp. 212-3.



Figure 13 – Malvolio, Olivia and Maria in Chulalongkorn University’s production of *Hunsa Ratree*

Tam Jai Tan (As You Like It productions in 1991 and 1993)

In 1991, a group of well-known Thai theatre practitioners formed a production team to stage Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, based on King Vajiravudh’s translation *Tam Jai Tan*. The production was staged for charity in a convention hall of Dusit Thani Hotel, a five-star hotel in central Bangkok. The performance was under the supervision of the nephew of King Vajiravudh, Prince Bhanuban Yugala, directed by the award-winning director and screenwriter Nalinee Sitasuwan, and performed by a cast of famous television and movie stars. With the promising combination in members of cast and crew, the production was promoted widely in the mass media. Although performed for a very limited number of performances, the production was a huge success. High praise was given to the innovative minimalist-style stage and costume designs which suggested a futuristic, unidentified period of time and place. In 1993, the Department of Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University, restaged the production

of *As You Like It* as a student production for educational purpose. Of course, the new cast was auditioned from within a group of theatre students. The venue was changed from a five-star hotel hall to the university's auditorium. However, the stylization, stage setting and costume design, more or less, resembled those of the previous Thai professional production.



Figure 14 – The production of *Tam Jai Tan* by the cast of professional actors in 1991

As aforementioned, one of the most interesting innovations in the production, which attracted major attention and discussion among theatre scholars, was the costume design. Valerie Wayne, in her article ‘A Denaturalized Performance: Gender and Body Construction in Thailand's *As You Like It*’, states that the costumes of the production could be interpreted as providing a view of gender and the body as culturally constructed and performative rather than naturally given:

What interest me particularly are the papier maché breast plates worn by all of the characters. These plates clearly distinguish men from women, but to me they also suggest that gender itself can be put on or altered.¹²

The idea of using breastplates to represent gender distinction was initiated by the costume designer for the production, Assistant Professor Vichai Lailavitmongkol of the Department of Industrial Design, Faculty of Architecture, Chulalongkorn University. The reasons for using breastplates, aside from the fact that it was a real time saver in costume changes, was to make the gender distinction stand out for the audience; also when it came to the important part of the play when the heroine starts to disguise herself as a man, it would be less confusing. The papier maché breastplates were designed to highlight and differentiate male and female bodies, particularly the upper part and the chest area – the most obvious part to distinguish the two sexes. The description by Valerie Wayne is clear enough to help those who did not see the production visualize the costumes and understand the objectives behind the design concept:

Over the skirts and leotards worn by the actresses who played Rosalind and Celia [...], for example, one could clearly see papier maché breast plates that enhanced or exaggerated their physical attributes by creating especially full breasts and slim waists. [...] First, the women's identities look in some respects artificial. They wear an extra layer of costume that suits the cultural associations of women with nurturance, grace, and fluidity. Secondly, not only gender but the female

¹² Quoted by Veohong, 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', para. 26 of 31.

body is reconstructed here to meet cultural assumptions about gender. [...] The dark, muscular breast plates worn by the men, on the other hand, created the effect of strong and even defensive bodies. The male actors also wore puffy bands on their arms and legs: Duke Frederick's bands had spikes on them, emphasizing his aggressive character; Orlando had four bands on his triceps and five on his quadriceps....When Rosalind turned into Ganymede in this play, she doffed her female breast plate for a muscular, male one – only it was pink. She also wore arm and leg bands, but only two for the triceps and three for the quadriceps.¹³

Different from the *Twelfth Night* production for which the script was translated specifically for stage purposes in a form of prose with a hint of archaic and poetic word usage, the production of *As You Like It* was based on King Vajiravudh's verse translation. The King's translation is renowned for its excellent use of poetic language and form, so the actors encountered more challenging tasks in memorizing and rendering lines in Thai verse form. For Thai verse, apart from the strict rhyming scheme, another essential principle is the perfect rhythm. In reading or reciting Thai verse, the reader is expected to follow a rhythmic feature dependent on different types of verse.¹⁴ Normally, most Thai verse forms are written in separated lines which automatically control its rhythmic feature when being read aloud. Each line should be treated as a single unit. That means when a reader finishes one line, a small gap or a pause is expected before continuing to the next line in order to make a perfect rhythm. This pattern is very

¹³ Quoted by Veohong, 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', para. 29 of 31.

¹⁴ See Chapter II, pp. 59-69.

obvious so that even a non-native Thai speaker can easily distinguish the difference between verse and prose when it is read aloud. However, in the production of *As You Like It*, the director opted for the idea that the actors should speak the verse lines as if they were dialogue. As a result, the rhythmic pattern of verse reading was obviously avoided. The actors tried their best to render the verse as if it was written in prose. The gap or the pause between lines to make verse-rhythm was largely ignored. For Thai audiences whose ears were tuned to Thai verse rhythm, this attempt of making-verse-sound-like-prose was a bit odd, although, acceptable. Rendering lines in perfect rhythm of Thai verse not only sounds very unnatural on stage, it could easily bore the audience who had to listen to a long rhythmic dialogue.

As this student production of *As You Like It* was more or less the replica of the successful previous Thai professional production of the same play in a smaller-scale, this particular production received less enthusiastic responses from audiences and critics outside the university circle compared to their other previous productions. However, with an objective to put on a play for educational purpose, this student production succeeded in its goal to train aspiring young theatre practitioners in how to approach, interpret and re-create Shakespeare's plays.

Ratree Nimit Klang Kimhun (A Midsummer Night's Dream production in 1997)

In 1997, the Department of Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University decided to stage another of Shakespeare's comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The play was given a very poetic Thai name (borrowed from Sanskrit) *Ratree Nimit Klang Kimhun* [*A Night's Dream in a Midsummer*]; the act of giving elaborate titles especially for Shakespeare's plays is a common practice and a dramatic fashion on the Thai stage. This project was, literally, more 'intercultural' than the earlier university-based Shakespeare productions especially in terms of stylization and interpretation as, this time, the play was to be directed by a Canadian visiting theatre professor from the University of Victoria, Linda Hardy. Since the production was completely in Thai, Nopomat Veohong – the script translator – also acted as Hardy's interpreter during the three-month rehearsal period. Each of Hardy's instructions had to be translated to the Thai actors. Directing a play in a language and cultural context that one knows so little about was a demanding task. Hardy, however, revealed that it was 'a wonderful opportunity to test one's ability in a language you don't speak. It broadens one's horizons and one learns a tremendous amount about oneself, one's goals and one's creative ability.'¹⁵

¹⁵ 'Shakespeare in Thai a highlight of fine arts exchange', Online International Report, University of Victoria, November 1997, <<http://ring.uvic.ca/97nov28/InternationalReport/Shakespeare.html>> [accessed 13 November 2006], para. 7 of 7.



Figure 15 – Chulalongkorn University’s production of *Ratree Nimit Klang Kimhun* [*A Night’s Dream in a Midsummer*] in 1997

Hardy put her creative ability to the test in order to examine ‘how very relevant Shakespeare is to today’s world’. According to the director, Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was selected because it tells a simple story of love, dreams, imagination and magic which is not limited by nationality, language, culture or time. The main plots would allow easy access for audiences of all countries. The director was also interested in bridging Western and Eastern worlds by using theatre as the main medium.¹⁶ Hardy decided to stage the play in a modern-day Bangkok setting – with Thai influence seen in all aspects of the production.¹⁷ The production was staged in a small 160-seat studio theatre with simple and minimal stage design and props. The use of different backdrops to signify the scene changes – for example, the forest scene, palace scene, and street scene – fitted in effectively with the assistance of lighting design.

¹⁶ Ritirong Jiwakanon, ‘Ratree Nimit Klang Kimhun: Costume Design under Thai Cultural Context’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Journal*, Thai Texts, 19 Volume 4, July-September 2002 (Khon Kaen: Khon Kaen University Press, 2002), p. 14.

¹⁷ Veohong, ‘Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand’s Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies’, para. 16 of 31.

In the modern-day Bangkok setting, the four young main characters – Hermia, Lysander, Demetrius, and Helena – were given Thai nationality yet they all kept their original names. Demetrius was a promising young army officer whose secure position in the military guaranteed a flourishing future. He was the kind of young man to whom all fathers in the country wanted to marry their daughters. And this was no exception for Egeus, also a high-ranking general in the Thai army, who foresaw a bright future for his only daughter, Hermia, as Demetrius's wife. Because these two main characters, Demetrius and Egeus, were specifically assigned the status of members of the Thai military army, Ritirong Jiwakanon – the costume designer for the production – shares an insight that the production team saw the social structure of Athens and the ladder of power exercised within the society as resembling those of the power-ranking structure in the army. Egeus, for example, exercised his superior power over his daughter, Hermia, by forcing her into marriage with the man of his choice; and Athenian law also supported this power exercise with some legal punishment for daughters who acted against their fathers' command.¹⁸ Other high-born characters – Hermia, Lysander, and Helena – were portrayed as Chulalongkorn University students. Hermia was a freshman in the Faculty of Arts. She was easily spotted on the stage as she was wearing the Thai freshman uniform with white socks.¹⁹ Hermia was in love with Lysander, a student from the Faculty of Fine Arts. Lysander, however, was not considered by Egeus a proper suitor for Hermia. With

¹⁸ Jiwakanon, p. 17.

¹⁹ Every female freshman in almost all government-sponsored universities in Thailand has to wear an official 'freshman' uniform which generally consists of a white shirt, a long pleated navy-blue skirt, and white socks. The socks are the most easily-identified symbol for the first year student. On entering the second year, students would drop the socks and wear black cut shoes instead.

some cultural background knowledge, Egeus's act was quite understandable as most parents in Thailand somehow had a fixed idea about careers in the field of fine arts as a bit insecure in terms of finance and income. There is a common Thai phrase, 'Silapin Sai Haeng' (literally 'an artist with dried intestines'), which reflects the attitude towards artists that they are likely to live their lives in a destitute condition. So most Thai parents would prefer their daughters to have no connection with such artists. Helena was portrayed as a second-year student also in the Faculty of Arts. She was drawn to Demetrius, like most Thai girls were, for his Prince Charming appearance in military uniform.

Apart from the group of noble characters, each of the six working-class comedy characters was also given a job which is commonly found in present day Bangkok. This was because some careers in the original script, such as joiner, tinker, and bellows-mender, do not exist in Thai society. It is best to quote Nopamat's description of how each character was transformed into Thai street workers. As a translator who worked so closely with the director of the production, she gives a brief explanation on how each character from the original play fits with each assigned modern Thai 'career':

Peter Quince was a hard-hat-wearing foreman who likes to take charge, hence explaining his gathering of the troupe to perform by royal command. Nick Bottom was a so-called hired motorcyclist. The heavy traffic in the streets of Bangkok is famously negotiated by these motorcyclists who swerve and manoeuvre their way around the city to provide messenger and passenger services, which partly explains his inclination to flirt around. [...] he was apparently a ladies' man and a womanizer. These motorcyclists' trademarks are

wind-breakers worn over a T-shirt and, of course, helmets. Snug was a uniformed security guard from northeastern Thailand with a speech problem – a profession not too farfetched to the northeastern migrants who come looking for work in the capital, while Francis Flute was an employee in a cleaning service company. To rationalize his assigned profession in the play, it was Flute who made the lion's mane out of one of his professional tools, a mop. Lastly, Robin Starveling's part was given to a female student. In the women-dominated milieu of the Faculty of Arts, gender-neutral parts have to be allocated to girls to tip the balance. In this production, Starveling was a street vendor who carried a shoulder pole with hanging bamboo baskets weighing on each end. This type of street vendor is a familiar sight in the streets of Bangkok where mobile merchants and eateries are omnipresent almost round the clock. For reasons of economy, the part of Snout was removed and his human wall bit was filled by the punctilious but exasperated Quince who was desperate to do anything to get the show to go on.²⁰

The magical world of fairies and spirits was also transformed – into the local version of the Thai spiritual world. For example, the mischievous Puck was staged as a local Thai spiritual creature, 'Kumarn Thong' – a naughty fairy in the form of a boy who, aside from being a good errand assistant, loves to play tricks on humans. All fairies were dressed in bright coloured, local-styled costumes with headgear and long flowing gowns with loose pants which resembled those worn by hill-tribe people from the north.²¹

²⁰ Veohong, 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', para. 19 of 31.

²¹ Ibid., para. 21-2 of 31.



Figure 16 – *RatreeNimit Klang Kimhun* [*A Night's Dream in a Midsummer*], Chulalongkorn University Production, Act 5 Scene 1

Apart from the changes of setting and characters' careers, the production also added some local content to make the play look more naturally indigenous. The use of these recognizable local sights and sounds helped set the right mood for the scene. For example, for Titania's entrance in Act 5 scene 1, the scene incorporated a traditional klong yao procession – with Thai drums as used in Thai festivities – to mark Titania's coming.²² Another important alteration was the replacement of Bottom's ass's head with a water buffalo's head. In Thai connotation, buffalos were commonly considered the stupidest creature and were always the symbol of stupidity, in the similar manner as the ass in the Western reception. Ritirong, the costume designer, reveals that this idea was suggested to the director as he thought that it would work more effectively and give a perfect sense for the Thai audience. Once it was visualized on stage, his idea was proved

²² Veohong, 'Transporting the Bard through Time: A Look into Thailand's Productions of Three Shakespearean Comedies', para. 24 of 31.

right. However, according to Jan Kott in his article, 'Titania and the ass's head', an ass does not simply represent stupidity but rather the symbol of sexual potency.

Since anti-quality and up to the Renaissance the ass was credited with the strongest sexual potency and among all the quadrupeds is supposed to have the longest and hardest phallus.²³

The water buffalo, however – in Thai reception, did not suggest a similar connotation in sexual power as in the West. It was selected to replace the ass in the original script for the fact that in Thailand it was generally recognized as the symbol of stupidity.

Payu Pirote (The Tempest production in 2007)

It took almost ten years for the Department of Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University to stage another of Shakespeare's plays – *The Tempest* – with the Thai title, *Payu Pirote* [*The Raging Storm*] in 2007. The script was based on a translation by Associate Professor Nopamat Veohong, who had translated almost every Shakespeare play staged by the department. The production was directed by a translator, director, drama lecturer, and theatre critic Pawit Mahasarinand who had previously directed many departmental productions

²³ Jan Kott, 'Titania and the ass's head', *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. by Boleslaw Taborski (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1964), p. 81.

and also worked with some professional theatres in many commercial theatre productions outside the university circle.²⁴

The Tempest production was the last of five contemporary theatre productions under a research project called ‘the Legends Retold’ officially funded by the Thailand Research Fund. This project aimed to encourage and support research projects in the field of theatre and performance arts specifically conducted by drama lecturers at the Department of Dramatic Arts, Chulalongkorn University. The five productions under the ‘Legends Retold’ research project were all retellings of some classical dramatic pieces, both Thai and Western, in contemporary stage productions. They were all designed as action research via the process of scripting, directing, and reinterpreting the ‘old tales’. One of the ultimate goals of the project was to use the directing techniques of contemporary theatre to communicate effectively with the contemporary Thai audience.

Not only was the production of *The Tempest* the last research production in the government-funded project, it was also the last production that was staged in the oldest studio theatre of the Department of Dramatic Arts. The 160-seat studio theatre, which was unofficially called Ronglakorn Ursorn (The Arts Theatre) among Thai theatre-goers, had been housing almost all the departmental productions for more than 30 years. To Thai professional theatre practitioners, many of whom graduated from this institution, it was a place, full of old sweet memories, that had also served as the first semi-professional stage on which many Thai theatre stars of today had made their debuts. The studio theatre was to be

²⁴ Some of his previous works include the translating and directing of the Thai productions of David Mamet’s *Oleanna* (1995), Peter Handke’s *Offending the Audience* (1996), and Steven Dietz’s *Private Eyes* in (2003).

demolished and replaced by a new departmental building in 2007. Coincidentally, just as *The Tempest* is believed to have been the last play written entirely by Shakespeare before he left the world of show business in London for his ‘retirement’ in Stratford, so the Thai production of *The Tempest* served as the farewell production to one of the oldest studio theatres in Thailand.

Pawit Mahasarinand, the director of the production, revealed that his personal inspiration to stage Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was the first Broadway production he had ever seen and by which he had been deeply impressed. Moreover, the play’s main plot conveyed the messages of revenge and forgiveness, and the legitimacy of power – themes which were perfectly relevant to the contemporary political situation in Thailand at that particular period of time. The plot of the play coincidentally (yet amusingly) reflected the real political turmoil in Thailand at that particular period when the then prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, a father of two daughters, was deposed by a military coup in September 2006 and had to live in exile in many different foreign countries, one among which was the British Isles. Some audiences and theatre critics, who attended the performance, reflected in their reviews that they could not help but see the relevance of the dramatic world to the real world.²⁵

The production was designed to feature many modern theatrical elements through costumes, setting, sound, and lightning designs. To update the setting, yet maintain the main plot, the story starts in 2007 when Prospero the Duke of Milan and his daughter Miranda were put to sea by his usurping wicked brother and left to die. Twelve years later, Prospero who was still alive and lived on an isolated

²⁵ Kittisak Suwanphokin, ‘Shakespeare: Climbing up the Ladder or Not?’, Post-performance discussion of *Payu Pirote [The Tempest]* Production, 28 January 2007.

island, used his magical power to cause a plane crash (the shipwreck in the original play) which brought all his old enemies together for him to take his revenge. The reason for updating the setting to the year 2019, Pawit explained, was to make it easier for his novice costume designing team, most of whom were theatre students, to experiment with the concept of futuristic-style costumes.

Even though the whole setting was updated to be modern, the translated script was not. A directly translated script was completely preserved with some scenes and monologues deleted to comfort the contemporary audiences who were more accustomed to the general two-hour length of films. The script was translated into prose with a hint of poetry. There was an extensive use of archaic Pali and Sanskrit-borrowed words in the translation which made the dialogues sound more like poems commonly found in old Thai literature than spoken prose. The director, however, was very determined to keep ‘Shakespeare’s language the way it is’ without a compromise to update or modernize the words. From his perspective, Shakespeare’s language was not at all incomprehensible; on the contrary, it suggested a ‘fantastical’ nature of drama which went some way beyond the reality.

I don’t see it [Shakespeare’s language] as an obstacle but a challenge. A challenge as to how we could help our actors to feel and deliver the lines as if they were day-to-day spoken dialogues.²⁶

[My translation]

²⁶ Interview with Pawit Mahasarinand, the director of *Payu Pirote* translated from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, on 25 January 2007.

A consequence was that while watching the actors perform on stage, no matter how naturalistic and realistic they became through their performance, the audience was constantly aware, by the use of this ‘fantastical’ old language, that what they were watching was the actors who were in their roles. As an audience member, I found this dramatic experience very similar to watching a Brechtian-style play which does not want its audience to lose themselves completely into the play but wants them to maintain a distance, and to be constantly aware of the fictionality of what is portrayed.

The main concept of the production, according to the director, was to bring the audience physically closer to the dramatic situations happening on stage as if they all were now on the same island as the characters. The stage design team was given the opportunity to exercise their power of imagination and creativity to their fullest capability to transform the whole theatre studio into a small isolated island. Because this was the very last production staged in this old studio venue, the production team was allowed to do whatever they liked in the theatre – something that had not been allowed to be done in a departmental property before – including dismantling the audience seats and changing the position of the conventional acting space. A wrap-around performance space was erected to surround the audience seating area. The stage design allowed actors to move freely around the theatre. The whole studio with black-colour background was splashed with dark blue colour to give the sense of being surrounded by a deep

blue sea. In the background an eerie score also played a very vital role in setting the right mood and creating ‘a surreal dreamland of illumination’.²⁷

The role of Prospero as the master of magic who got everyone utterly under his power was viewed and reinterpreted as the true director of the production. According to Pawit, Prospero was the one who foresaw, planned, and controlled everyone’s fate, and all that happened on this island, with his magic power. Based on this interpretation, the actor who played Prospero in this production had to be in charge of the main technical controls for lighting and sound effects, all by himself. Pawit reveals that he was inspired by observing a DJ in a pub who managed to do so many things at the same time, choosing the music, controlling the sound system, and also entertaining the audience through his talk. The real challenge weighed upon the actor who played Prospero. Apart from learning all his lines and memorizing the performance cues, he also had to learn to use all the technical gadgets and memorize the technical cues at the same time. Viewing the role of Prospero as a theatre director was in itself not totally new or original. A Japanese adaptation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* by Ninagawa – first performed in Tokyo in 1987 and then at the Edinburgh Festival in 1988 – used a similar concept. Ninagawa’s adaptation portrayed the story of *The Tempest* as a play-within-a-play, with the actor playing Prospero as a director who controlled the action of *The Tempest* just like a stage manager.²⁸

²⁷ Pattara Danutra, ‘Shakespeare for a new generation’, Outlook section, *Bangkok Post*, January 24, 2007 < <http://thaitempest.multiply.com/reviews/item/2> > [accessed 2 June 2008], para. 7 of 12.

²⁸ Akihiko Senda, ‘The rebirth of Shakespeare in Japan: from the 1960s to the 1990s’, trans. by Ryuta Minami in *Shakespeare and the Japanese Stage*, ed. by Takashi Sasayama, J.R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 22.

The modern interpretation of the Thai production gave a clear direction for the casting process. As a university production and a part of educational research project, the audition gave priority to the group of university students. However, professional veteran actors were also recruited in the major roles of Prospero and Gonzalo, for both characters required mature actors beyond the university student's age range. There were also some 'unconventional' casting decision particularly in the roles of Ferdinand and Caliban. With the new interpretation, the role of Ferdinand – the charming young prince of Naples – was played by a plain-looking, and quite chubby young actor; whereas the role of Caliban, 'a savage and deformed slave', was portrayed by a good-looking young boy dressed more or less like a reggae musician. Pawit explains the choice of his atypical casting in a personal interview:

I just thought that there is always a good-looking hero in all Shakespeare's plays which makes it very typical and predictable. This story is, however, quite different in a sense that Miranda was brought up and lived in an isolated island for all her life. She has never met any other creatures but her father and Caliban. Therefore, she has no frame of reference or the perception of our contemporary 'beauty standard' -- something like what is considered beautiful or good-figures. It may seem unbelievable that she falls for this very plain-looking Ferdinand. But it also indicates her unconditional love. It is a kind of love which is hardly found in the modern world. We all now always put some conditions up against true love. When a modern-day girl meets some good-looking chaps, the questions like – Is he gay? What job he's doing? What type of car he's driving? – would always

arise. But there's no such thing in Miranda's mind.

[My translation]

Based on this interpretation, the audience found the 'love scene' between the two young lovers very amusing. The supposedly conventional romantic scene was completely transformed into a romantic-comedic scene, especially every time Miranda showered Ferdinand with compliments on his 'brave form'. All of which was in contradiction with the audience's common sense and the reception of beauty according to today's standards:

MIRANDA: I might call him

A thing divine, for nothing natural

I ever saw so noble.

(*The Tempest*, Act I, Scene II, Line 414)



Figure 17 – Miranda and Ferdinand in *Payu Pirote (The Tempest)*,

Chulalongkorn University Production in 2007

For the role of Caliban, Pawit cast a fine-looking young actor. He disclosed the fact that in the primary stage of casting, he almost selected an actor who was a Muslim with an obvious Arabic look. But once he realized that this may reflect some hidden prejudice towards the Muslim-looking actor in the role might the main antagonist, he changed his mind. Caliban in this production was nothing like a malformed monster. On the contrary, he was a good looking young man who, according to Pawit, ‘possessed and represented monstrous characteristics.’²⁹



Figure 18 – Prospero and Caliban in *Payu Pirote (The Tempest)*,

Chulalongkorn University Production in 2007

²⁹ Interview with Pawit Mahasarinand, the director of *Payu Pirote* translated from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, on 25 January 2007.

Another unusual casting decision was for the comic figures – Stephano the drunken butler and Trinculo the jester. Both roles were played by female students. Pawit admitted that comic characters were the most difficult roles to cast and to direct, especially in Shakespeare’s plays in which the fool was always the non-omissible and significant part. Pawit explained that he cast two female students to play the role of fools because in the original script, Miranda was supposed to be the only female role in the story, while more than half of theatre-major students were female students. As a university production, the departmental philosophy, for all intents and purposes, is to give priority in casting to theatre majors so he decided to experiment and give additional opportunities to his female students. His interpretation, although it was somewhat ambiguous when being performed on stage, was that Stephano and Trinculo were actually female characters – very modern types of women who drink, smoke, and swear. But Caliban who had very few experiences of meeting other creatures on the island, mistakenly identified them as men. Despite the modern interpretation, the two actresses seemed to be quite uncomfortable as they tried hard to cope with Shakespeare’s slapstick comedy.

Responses and reviews from audiences and theatre critics to the production of *The (Thai) Tempest* were very positive. Some critics considered it successful in the sense that it reproduced a Shakespearean masterpiece ‘in a format engaging to young Thais without compromising the play’s dramatic and literary spirit’, which was, after all, the ultimate goal that this research-base project aimed to accomplish.³⁰

³⁰ Danutra, para. 8 of 12.



Figure 19 – Stephano and Trinculo in *Payu Pirote (The Tempest)*,
Chulalongkorn University Production in 2007

Thammasat University productions

Unlike Chulalongkorn University's productions, which claimed to stage 'direct translations' of Shakespeare, the Shakespeare productions produced by Thammasat University, seemed to enjoy a wide range of dramatic exploration and theatre experimentation to indigenize Shakespeare as Thai. Initiated by Mattani Ratnin, a professor in Dramatic Literature, student productions by the Department of Dramatic Arts, Thammasat University, became renowned for their creativity and for the diversity of their 'localized' semi-professional theatre productions. Mattani, who has strong academic background in French Language and Literature, got her Ph.D. in Thai Dramatic Literature from The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. In 1971 after returning to Thailand, she began her teaching career at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University.

Mattani initiated the idea of forming a student dramatic troupe, which later became the official establishment of the Department of Dramatic Arts of which she served as the director until her retirement.

Mattani has extensive experiences in indigenizing Western plays into Thai. Throughout her twenty-five active years in the theatre (from 1971-1996), she produced only two direct-translation productions: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (staged in 1971 and 1986) and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (staged in 1972). Her other 30 stage productions are all adaptations, both from Thai and Western classics, including Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Romeo and Juliet*.³¹

Mattani's perspective was to bring the Western plays closer to the Thai target audience through various methods of adaptation and acculturation, concealing traces of the original. The need to adapt unfamiliar new things to suit local perception is a common practice found in every culture and in every area not only in theatre and performing arts. Andrew Gerstle, in his writing on the subject of the use of the 'Exotic' in a different culture, gives a very good answer to the question why people need to adapt new things. He says:

We cannot help but relate the new to the familiar in order to grasp a hold of each new object or concept we encounter; to gain an understanding we must find a place for it in the categories of our experience. Initially at least, we must

³¹ Mattani Ratnin, 'Kum Num' [Introduction], in *Plae Plaeng Lae Prae-roop Bot Lakhon* [Translation, Adaptation, and Transmutation of Literary Works], by Jukkrit Duangpattra, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Sum Nak Pim Siam, 2001), p. (10).

domesticate the exotic in order to control it and to analyze and make sense of it for an audience ignorant of the subject.³²

This is very similar to Mattani's reasons for adapting the Western plays into the Thai context. Not only does she find it a more challenging task to exercise her imagination and creativity as a theatre practitioner, she also places primary focus on the target audience and their frame of reference in order to convey the main message of the plays more effectively. As Mattani puts it:

As the director, I always opt for the reinterpretation of the play and blend it into a Thai context so that the audience would immediately receive the philosophical message [of the story]. They would also be provoked to think about the main theme. Adapting the plays into Thai or Eastern contexts would make better communication and interpretation of the plays.³³

[My translation]

The physical appearance of local actors is another key factor for Mattani in her adapted versions. Many Asian Shakespeare productions, especially those during the early-twentieth century, carried the weight of producing plays that preserved Shakespeare's 'authenticity'. They tried to stage Shakespeare's plays in the exact same way the plays were traditionally staged in England. Some productions staged 'authentic' Shakespeare by copying all the Western dramatic

³² Andrew Gerstle, 'Shakespeare and Japanese Theatre: Artists' and Scholars' Use of the 'Exotic'', *Shakespeare East and West*, ed. by Minoru Fujita and Leonard Pronko, Japan Library (Surrey: Curzon Press Ltd., 1996), p. 61.

³³ Ratnin, 'Kum Num' [Introduction], p. (12).

norms: acting style, Elizabethan costumes, settings, and even blocking. However, these Asian productions demanded total suspension of disbelief from their audience in order to turn native oriental-looking performers into Elizabethan ladies and gentlemen in their imagination. To transform their actors to look as much as possible like Europeans, some early Shakespeare's productions in China and Japan even went as far as having their actors 'wear Renaissance-style clothes, dye their hair red or blond, or even use artificial noses.'³⁴ Mattani was against the idea of this 'racial transformation'. In her opinion, it was much easier to imitate gesture and acting style than to transform physical appearance. Thai actors, most of whom are 'short, stout-legged, round-faced with a small nose, almond-shaped eyes', look 'oddly funny' when they put on Elizabethan costumes.³⁵ Mattani also believed that Thai actors had a more difficult time portraying Western characters than portraying foreign Asian characters:

Thai, Chinese and Japanese gestures are not too hard for Thai actors to imitate convincingly, but for Western gesture and etiquette, Thai actors were more likely to portray it in an unnatural manner. Obviously, they feel uncomfortable and embarrassed to do so.³⁶

[My translation]

In *Introduction to Stage Theatre Directing*, Mattani categorizes her common strategies in indigenizing Western plays into three broad groups. The

³⁴ Senda, p. 17.

³⁵ Ratnin, 'Kum Num' [Introduction], pp. (11)-(12).

³⁶ Ibid., pp. (11)-(12).

first method is to update and re-locate the play within a Thai context, including changing the characters' names and the play's setting into Thai. This particular method is recommended for contemporary playscripts for which the background and setting of the original play are known to the contemporary audience. It would be more difficult to update and re-locate an old play in which the period and setting are different from the modern day. In this case, according to Mattani, a second method is considered, which is comparing the similar historical period of time in the original version to the Thai context. In this case, Elizabethan plays may be re-created in a form of traditional Thai drama which also gives the sense of historical period as in the original play. The last method, which is the most frequently-used by Mattani, is re-locating the play to an imaginative setting or to a foreign land. This is used when the Thai setting would have no cultural background relevant to the original texts. However, Mattani concludes that it is necessary for the director to pay attention to studying details about the culture, tradition, social context, and history of the target country in order to make as few mistakes as possible.³⁷

In her adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in 1982, given a Thai title *Mongpa Maha Burut* [*The Great Man Mongpa*], Mattani set the play in Mongolia, not only to suit the physical appearance of Thai actors but also because she found that the socio-political system of the nomadic tribal races in Mongolia and their feudal structure were similar to the old Scottish social system in *Macbeth*. The adaptation of *Macbeth* was intentionally staged as a part of the celebratory

³⁷ Mattani Ratnin, *Kwam Roo Bueng Ton Keaw Kab Karn Sillapa Karn Kamkap Lakhon Wethi* [*Introduction to Stage Theatre Directing*], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Thammasart University Press, 2003), pp. 202-3.

occasion on the 200-year-anniversary of Bangkok in 1982. Mattani found the storyline of *Macbeth* perfectly suitable to emphasize the vital role of the institution of the Thai monarchy. However, to avoid negative comments and misinterpretation from Thai theatre critics concerning the institution of Thai monarchy Mattani chose to re-locate the play:

I staged *Mongpa Maha Burut* [*Macbeth*] in order to reflect the Thai political situation when some powerful politician tried to foment a rebellion to gain the absolute political power for their own group. [I want these people] to be aware that the monarchy is sacred. Those who have malicious intentions would always be defeated and have to repay their bad karma [in many different ways] such as being exiled to live a difficult life in a foreign country or encountering disasters. The *Macbeth* production therefore was intended to speak to those ambitious figures who are after power.³⁸

[My translation]

It is a norm in Thai theatre that tragedy should not be staged on any auspicious occasions. Nevertheless, as *Macbeth* carried the message that Mattani wanted to convey to her audiences, she decided to change the ending of the story. All tragic events, including the deaths of many main characters in the original version, were just a ‘nightmare’ of the ambitious Mongpa [or Macbeth] who had a

³⁸ Ratnin, ‘Kum Num’ [Introduction], p. (18).

wicked plan to usurp the throne from the rightful king. However, he had not yet put the plan into action.³⁹



Figure 20 – Thammasat University Production of *Mongpa Maha Burut* [*The Great Man Mongpa*], an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in 1982

This was not the first time that Mattani transformed a tragedy into a happy-ending story. Her adaptation of the most famous of Shakespeare's tragedies *Romeo and Juliet*, also had a totally different ending. *Fun Khong Juliet* [*Juliet's Dream*] was staged to celebrate the year of Golden Jubilee as the 50th anniversary celebrations of King Rama IX's (King Bhumibol) accession to the throne in 1996; again a celebrative occasion for which tragedy would usually be considered to be extremely inappropriate. In fact, this adaptation was based more on the famous American musical *West Side Story*, which was itself also adapted from

³⁹ Jukkrit Duangpatra, *Plae, Plang, Lae Prae roop bot lakhon* [*Translation, Adaptation, and Transmutation of Literary Works*], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Sum Nak Pim Siam, 2001), p. 124.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Mattani used the play to mirror one of the major political revolutions in Thailand, commonly remembered by the Thais today as the '14 October Revolution', the uprising by the people to bring down a military dictator. The revolution took place on the 14 October 1973 when student activist leaders mainly from Thammasat University were expelled and arrested for their anti-government activities. It led to a bloody confrontation between the military army and a group of students and common people. The confrontation became a brutal massacre.⁴⁰ The play *Fun Khong Juliet* was set in an unspecified modern city where Rames (Romeo) and Nareeya (Juliet) – university student activists from different famous universities – were paired up to star in a charity stage production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The plot was portrayed in a play-within-a-play format in which the on-stage events paralleled 'off-stage' ones. The on-stage play presented the tragic love story of *Romeo and Juliet* from the beginning to the death scene. But this was a play within an 'off-stage' parallel story in which Nareeya's (Juliet) father, who was a general in the military army, ordered the shooting of student protesters, one of whom was Rames, the leader of the student activists. Rames was shot, but not killed. In the end, when the story unfolded and everyone was reconciled, Rames happily married Nareeya. Mattani revealed her insight on this subject:

The ending scene was meant to reflect the 14 October 1973 political fact when His Majesty the King asked the government leaders and student activists to end the fighting in peace for the sake of the country. [This changed ending of the

⁴⁰ 'History of Thailand', Wikipedia website,
<[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Thailand_\(1932%E2%80%931973\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Thailand_(1932%E2%80%931973))>
[accessed 10 June 2010]

play] was meant to honour the act of the King. It would also be suitable to put on stage for this celebrative occasion of His Majesty's fifty years on the throne.⁴¹

[My translation]



Figure 21 – Thammasat University Production of *Fun Khong Juliet*

[*Juliet's Dream*], inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, in 1994

Mattani also decided on an adaptation of Shakespeare's play on the ground that there was no relevant socio-political background in Thai history for the events of Shakespeare's story. For her stage adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* in 1989, which she gave a Thai title, *Rak Nee Mee Raka* [*The Cost of Love*], Mattani highlighted the themes of love, money, and friendship while diminishing the original central conflict of Christian and Jewish relations. The reason that the original theme of religious conflict was not emphasized was because Mattani thought that most Thai audiences would not have the appropriate background reference for the subject. Also, her adaptation was set in a Southeast Asian country where there had been no record of Jewish-Christian conflict or

⁴¹ Ratnin, 'Kum Num' [Introduction], p. (16).

similar problems. Religious clashes in this region were virtually unknown as most of the population in each country practised their own religion. Mattani thus found it a sensible choice to delete or diminish some religion-related scenes. However, the play still maintained the plot of hatred and the revenge of the antagonist Shylock who had been insulted by Antonio. Highlight was also put on the scene that Jessica, Shylock's daughter, eloped with a Christian and stole his money. The scene was highlighted to make the story convincing enough when it reached its climax in the court scene when Shylock insisted on taking Antonio's life to pay for the elopement of Shylock's daughter with Antonio's friend. Mattani also cut some supporting characters such as Tubal, Shylock's friend, and Launcelot the Fool, to keep the story short.

Mattani makes a clear remark in the director's note that it is very important for the director to study the script very carefully and show respect to the original work through the production, which was after all the 're-creation' of the original. However, she believes that the director also has dramatic licence to interpret the script and rearrange it the way he or she thinks it will best deliver the play's main message. Directing is, after all, a personal work of art not a perfect copy of the original. The director should have room to exercise his/her imagination to create or re-create the original text. The audience in the target culture may also be able to appreciate the full extent of the 're-creation' and comprehend the message which is related to their background knowledge.

Chapter IX

Shakespeare in Thai Popular Culture and Thai Mass Media in the Late 20th and the early 21st Centuries

What is Shakespeare doing in Thai contemporary popular culture?

What is Shakespeare doing in Thai contemporary popular culture? This question has been raised, studied and discussed from many academic angles for more than two decades. The question was raised initially, perhaps, because of the fact that Shakespeare is still to be seen everywhere in our time. We see him, allusions to him and adaptations of his works in almost *everything*: theatre, films, television series, advertisements, musicals, ballets, operas, radio, pop songs, cartoon books, children's books, novels, computer games, and even pornography. Although we cannot really say that Shakespeare, and Shakespearean allusions, comprise a huge number of appearances in world-wide contemporary mass media, the face of Shakespeare and references to his works have never disappeared. Perhaps it is neither because today's audiences are still crazy about staging and watching his plays, nor because he is still the 'magnetic' figure which attracts huge publicity or makes huge profits in today's entertainment business. It is, perhaps, because he is the most accessible 'shared touchstone'¹ that allows people from different cultural backgrounds, nationalities, ages, education and interests to share their very basic common knowledge about world classics.

¹ Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 19.

Shakespeare and popular culture, as considered by some academics, are the odd couple.² The words – *Shakespeare* and *popular culture* – in themselves suggest some ambiguity. To begin with, the word ‘culture’ itself is one of the most complicated words to define. In broad terms, ‘culture’, according to Douglas Lanier, suggests ‘a distinctive way of life an integrated manner of doing, thinking, and feeling indigenous to a group of individuals [...] it might also include a shared language or slang, rituals or practices, bodies of knowledge, institutions, and ways of conceptualizing the world’.³ In other words, ‘culture’ means everything that is related to a human’s way of living. However, in a more specific meaning, ‘culture’ also seems to have a very close relation to the domain of art. When we classify something or someone as a ‘cultural product’ or a ‘cultural figure’, it is to imply the excellence of taste, and good quality of the subject mentioned. Shakespeare, of course, belongs to this set as the symbol for this sense of ‘culture’. Needless to say he is positioned at the centre of the Western canon as *the* literary icon. He, therefore, ‘serves as a trademark for time-tested quality and wisdom, and so [...] lends legitimacy to whatever [he] is associated with.’⁴ In Thailand, knowledge of his works, particularly in the colonization period, was used as an indicator of the state of civilization.

Shakespeare and popular culture are often referred to in two very distinctive and contradictory domains – the highbrow and the lowbrow. While Shakespeare is the symbol of high culture and the subject often preserved and found in university courses, academic conferences, museums and privileged

² Lanier, p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

theatre, popular culture, on the other hand, refers to mass media which is widely exhibited as part of daily life and allows easy access by the general public. The distinction between high culture and popular culture, particularly in terms of different tastes and aesthetics, is studied by many academics. An academic-philosopher, whose theories in social class distinction are widely discussed and accepted, is the distinguished French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu is not only interested in studying features of social class and cultural tastes, but also the origin of those tastes and how they arise and shape themselves in different conditions of class and social status.⁵ In distinguishing ‘high’ from ‘popular’ culture, Bourdieu suggests that it is not so much to do with the quality of the art work itself nor does it lie in the social background of a high-class audience. It depends, rather, on the attitude each audience (‘high’ or ‘popular’) habitually forms towards the works.⁶ According to Bourdieu, this ‘attitude’, which can be referred to as ‘taste’ in the broad sense, is one of the most significant indicators of social identity. His insight towards the notion of ‘taste’ – whether it belongs to the high or the low – is that it is a natural process that has occurred and is rooted in the class system. His view is that ‘taste’ or ‘admiration for art’ of people from different classes is not an innate predisposition but rather something that each individual learns and develops. It is more or less ‘the product of a specific process of inculcation characteristic of the educational system’.⁷ Although the highbrow apparently attain a better position and access to higher education, which also implies a possibility of a more refined sense of aesthetics, it is the low culture and

⁵ Richard Jenkin, *Pierre Bourdieu* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 129.

⁶ See Lanier, p. 6.

⁷ Jenkin, p. 133.

its cultural products that dominate in society as a whole. This is, however, not an unanticipated fact as the lowbrow comprises the majority in almost every society. Popular cultural products are thus designed to serve the needs of the majority. Besides, cultural products of high culture also demand audiences to have special knowledge (which of course comes from high education), while for the popular culture products, audiences can approach the works and judge them without using any analytic standards but solely with their own aesthetic sense. As Douglas Lanier puts it,

[...] high culture depends upon reverence and professional distance, popular culture depends upon approval and identification. Thus *Hamlet* might become high culture if we attended to Shakespeare's recasting of revenge tragedy conventions and popular culture if we booed Claudius and cheered for Hamlet in the final dueling scene.⁸

To gain a more profound understanding of why and how Shakespeare and allusions to his works have been extensively used in Thai popular culture (which has a very different set of aesthetic standards and entertainment values from the high culture which Shakespeare often represents), the background knowledge of popular culture and its nature are needed. The word 'popular' itself carries multi-meanings. As Robert Shaughnessy points out,

seen from some angles, it denotes community, shared values, democratic participation, accessibility, and fun; from others, the mass-produced

⁸ Lanier, p. 6.

commodity, the lowest common denominator, the reductive or the simplified, or the shoddy, the coarse, and the meretricious.⁹

However, when the term ‘popular’ is attached to Shakespeare, it raises all sorts of questions about taste and artistic value and also leads to issues of the license of ‘popular’ adaptations. These questions include asking who is qualified to adapt and to whom adapted versions are addressed and whom they aim to please.

The term ‘popular’ originally comes from the Latin *popularis* which means ‘of the people’. Literally, the word suggests that what is produced within popular culture ‘belongs to the people’. In this sense, it seems to suggest some ambiguity. Does it mean that the popular products must be produced by ‘the people’? Or does it mean that the products are exclusively consumed by ‘the people’ while produced by others? Can it be both? Mary Lamb concludes in *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* that the term ‘popular culture’ is commonly used with three different meanings:

(1) through an engagement in oppositional politics with mainstream groups, (2) as a simple majority of the population below the level of gentry, and (3) as participants in the traditional festive practices of an increasingly beleaguered ‘merrie England.’¹⁰

⁹ Robert Shaughnessy, ‘Introduction’, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. by Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 2.

¹⁰ Mary Ellen Lamb, *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

The first meaning suggests that popular culture is something that is widely favoured or well-liked by the majority population. In contemporary media, it often refers to commercial entertainment in mass media that targets the public audience. 'Popular music' is a clear example in this case. Peter A. Jackson elucidates the difference between 'popular music' and 'serious music', with 'the former being standardized, mechanized, and having a soporific effect on the social consciousness; the latter requiring effort, concentration, and high technical competence, disrupting the continuum of everyday life and encouraging recollection'.¹¹ Jackson's account more or less implies that most of the popular works and their contents are purposefully designed to attract mass audiences, perhaps in search for profit, while 'serious' works are less interested in making money but rather offer a self-expression and an expose of one's aesthetic values. The second meaning designates popular culture by the degree of 'vulgarity, triviality, and baseness',¹² all of which are assumed to be common qualities of the mainstream population. Peter Burk comments that 'popular', in this sense, refers to those who are 'ordinary: the unlearned, the non-elite, the people who have not been to grammar school or university'.¹³ Needless to say, this particular meaning of 'popular' also suggests the financial identity of the people in this group that they are also inferior financially. It is 'a culture of poverty' to which that they belong.¹⁴ Last but not least, the third meaning demonstrates the apparent characteristics of 'popular culture' products, most of which possess happy,

¹¹ Peter A. Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 76-7.

¹² Jackson, *Maps of Meaning: An Introduction to Cultural Geography*, p. 76.

¹³ See Lamb, p. 1.

¹⁴ Lamb, p. 2.

entertaining, non-serious characteristics in response to popular demand, as found in almost every culture especially in folk or rural traditions. However, there is also a notion, suggested by many academics, that popular culture is not necessarily ‘the genuine voice of the ‘people’’ as it, in fact, ‘does *not* typically spring from ‘the people’.’¹⁵ Contemporary popular culture, as Lanier points out, is, instead, produced by the ‘culture industry’ or commercial business enterprises.¹⁶ The products created by these companies have followed successful formulae of reproduction with similar designs, formats, and presentations. The ‘people’ are hardly ever given any other cultural choices. They consume products ready-made for them.

The most important question which needs to be investigated here is: how is it possible that these two extremely different cultures – Shakespeare and popular media – blend into one? The explanation may lie in the fact that Shakespeare is one of a very few literary figures who can move comfortably between high and low cultures as he is recognized and accepted, although to different degrees and with different objectives, by both cultures. Originally, Shakespeare and his works were parts of popular culture in the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. His works contained all the essential elements which aimed to please masses of people. However, this may not be a valid answer within the frame of the contemporary context. Shakespearean theatre in the traditional Elizabethan style also struggles to some degree to draw attention from the modern popular audience; a four-hundred-year gap has also transformed the popular audiences from those in the Elizabethan period. Contemporary studies in the

¹⁵ Lanier, p. 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

subject of Shakespeare and popular culture, therefore, focus more on the use of Shakespearean allusions, reinvention, adaptation and the appropriation of Shakespeare into the mass entertainment media in particular periods and cultures. Some researchers pay attention to studying Shakespearean theatre and drama which merge into the folk theatre (in this sense, the ‘popular tradition’) in different cultures. The diversity of Shakespeare and popular culture as a subject of study in academic circle is evidence of the fact that Shakespeare is still a reliable commodity to the producers in popular culture who still see an opportunity to make profit from his name and his works. Michael Bristol writes in a magazine advertisement to convince real estate companies to offer their potential buyers subscriptions to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in the 1980s; the advert reads:

In the world of practical affairs, Shakespeare has real importance, for he is, among other things, the greatest apartment salesman of our time.¹⁷

Douglas Lanier is arguably the only one who offers a direct answer to the question ‘What is Shakespeare doing in popular culture?’ He suggests that Shakespeare and his allusions are exploited for different specific purposes in popular culture. Thus perhaps Shakespeare can help create or elucidate some *meaning* the producers originally have in mind. On a shallow surface, Shakespeare seems to be used ‘merely as an inert decoration or simple-minded token of prestige’.¹⁸ However, this is not the only possible answer. Once we can figure out what is the ultimate goal or hidden message to be achieved by using

¹⁷ Quoted in Anderegg, p. 14.

¹⁸ Lanier, p 16.

Shakespeare allusions, we should truly understand the place of Shakespeare in our contemporary popular culture.

In Chapter III and IV, I have set out all the essential background information in the history of Thai theatre and the dichotomous set in Thai theatre traditions including their development through different socio-political contexts in different periods. My focal point was to suggest that, within the two distinctive domains of Thai theatre traditions, Shakespeare has always been classed as a part of the high tradition from his first introduction in Thailand. So Shakespeare was introduced within the circle of high culture from the court theatre tradition to the elite (or intellectual) tradition, despite the fact that Shakespeare's theatrical devices are primarily designed to please public audiences of the low tradition. In spite of Shakespeare's Elizabethan language usage (that proved to be one of the principal obstacles that caused Thai audiences and readers to shy away from his works), I am pretty much convinced that Shakespeare's dramatic elements and his theatre stylization have many things in common with traditional Thai popular theatre and may even encourage responses from today's popular Thai audiences. Shakespearean drama should still be able to offer what the Thai audience is looking for and features with which it is familiar from the Thai dramatic cultural heritage.

However, one might argue that Shakespeare wrote the plays to cater for the needs of Elizabethan audiences, not of the Thai public audiences in the twenty-first century. Shakespeare, even in Western popular theatre today, is struggling to find new routes to keep up with the fast-moving pace of contemporary theatre. How is it possible that Shakespeare can fit into the popular

culture in a country located in another part of the globe which practises totally different theatrical styles and has a different aesthetic tradition? It is, in fact, really hard to draw the attention of Thai popular audiences to either ‘authentic’ or ‘adapted’ Shakespearean theatre. In reality, his canonical image does not help boost the ticket sales nor does it guarantee box-office success. The main concern here is no longer how to adapt Shakespeare to respond to the tastes of Thai popular audiences. Different dramatic tastes are also not really an issue. The main factor is that theatre is no longer the major source of entertainment for Thai popular audiences. ‘Theatre’, in the general reception of contemporary audiences in Thailand, is a place of entertainment which houses live performances ranging from Western-style spoken plays to musicals. It is actually an area preserved for some selected groups of audiences, most of whom are the educated middle-class city dwellers. In addition, professional theatre troupes and playhouses are to be found mainly in Bangkok; it is a non-accessible area to the majority of popular audiences in rural areas. Live theatre has ceased to attract major interest since the creation of films and television soaps.

The only form of stage entertainment which is still known, and watched within groups of local fans, is *likay* – Thai folk opera. *Likay* theatrical style and Shakespearean theatre share many dramatic elements in common. Moreover, *likay* is one of the most primitive forms of Thai popular entertainment. It is also claimed that it has had great influence in shaping Thai popular culture today. To make a successful television series, some famous drama directors even have accepted that they need to borrow dramatic elements from traditional *likay* theatre. To understand the characteristics of *likay* performance is to understand Thai local

audiences at a deeper level and to understand what they demand from popular dramatic arts.

***Likay* and its dramatic elements**

As in most cultures, popular traditions of ordinary people are rarely found in historical records. In Thailand when the court was still the centre of state power, most of the surviving records were written by court artists, mainly about theatre in the court. Popular theatre was mentioned, very rarely, only when it was included in some state-festive events. Most written evidence of ordinary folk traditions can be found in historical journals recorded by foreigners who usually found the local cultures more exciting and exotic than they appeared to local eyes. The descriptions from observations by foreign writers sometimes lack accuracy as well as a profound understanding in terms of Thai traditions and local culture. However, they still show some interesting insights from the eyes of the outsiders. Another reason why the records of theatre of the low culture are rare is because the principal element of low-tradition theatre consisted of extensive use of improvisation including improvised witty jokes. Play scripts were never considered an essential component, particularly as it might be hard to find one of the theatre crew members who could read and write. Moreover, there was no demand, either from the audiences or from the players themselves, to look for new plots and new ideas for plots. Traditional stories were all the audience needed to see; they were stories that everyone knew very well. The fun part was to see how a particular troupe drove the same old story forward by demonstrating their improvisational skills. Basically, one story would never been played in the same

way by different theatre troupes, nor would the story even be played in the exact same way by one troupe. All of which leads to the conclusion why the written records about Thai theatre from the 'low' tradition are very scarce.

Amongst traditional dramatic forms of Thai popular culture, *likay* is without a doubt the most popular form. It has been in favour with the Thai popular audiences for more than a century and is still, even today, one of the most popular stage performances widely seen in many parts of the country. *Likay*, or *yeekay* as some local people call it, can be broadly defined as Thai folk opera. It is another form of traditional dance drama with simplified dance movements by comparison with the court tradition. The dance gestures in *likay* are borrowed from the high tradition but, according to some critics, they are 'second-rate' or less-refined in terms of artistic beauty and accuracy by the standards of the high culture. However, dancing is not the heart of *likay* performance. The actors only dance when they feel that the dramatic moment of the plot requires it. Instead of having a singing chorus to sing the lines for them as in the high-tradition dance drama, the *likay* actors sing themselves. Some famous *likay* actors gain their reputation and fortune chiefly from their singing talent, or their 'sweet voice', rather than from their dancing skills. Although, the main lyrics are already written down for them as an outline of the story, the actors rely heavily on their own quick-wit to improvise the songs. In terms of the use of language, Thai *likay* and Shakespearean drama share some similar practices. According to Gary Carkin, language in *likay* is similar to Shakespearean usage in the sense that 'it serves to

make the action clear and establish audience identification with characters.’¹⁹ The two domains of language are the colloquial (for common characters) and the more formal, poetic language (for aristocratic characters). Basically, the aristocratic characters employ standard, central Thai language whereas the clowns speak in a regional dialect and frequently use crude expressions. Carkin also suggests that the different levels of the use of language on stage are an apparent reflection of a unified state in Thai culture which contains two interacting systems and traditions: the aristocratic, generated from above, and the common, from below.²⁰

Likay troupes do not have a permanent theatre or venue to perform in. They perform mostly on local festive occasions such as at temple fairs, housewarming or birthday celebrations, or as a part of the entertainment in some big national festivals. They perform when they are hired so they have to travel from place to place depending on their contracts. The performance normally starts at 8 p.m. and lasts until 2 a.m., sometime until dawn. If they have to perform on successive nights, each night the troupe might provide a totally different story or perhaps, if the audience demands, different episodes of the same story. The stage decoration and props are quite simple and few; in fact, it depends very much on the reputation of the troupe. A popular *likay* troupe, of course, is more capable financially of affording a huge, extravagantly-decorated stage which is another attraction that draws local audiences to see their performances. Traditionally, the stage is simply raised above the ground level of the audience. Various multicolour-painted backdrops are used to provide a quick change of scenes and

¹⁹ Gary Bryden Carkin, ‘*Likay: The Thai Popular Theatre Form and Its Function within Thai Society*’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1984), p. 146.

²⁰ Carkin, p. 146.

identify different settings. Amongst the basic backdrops are those that signify a palace hall, a palace garden, a countryside hut, and a forest. These are the necessary settings for most Thai traditional *likay* stories. The most important prop (in some cases, the only stage prop) is a bench or a chair placed right at the centre stage, which can be used for many purposes. The bench may be a throne for a king, a royal bed for a princess, or even a bed mat for the poor. The musicians sit to the left wing of the stage which provides them with a perfect view of the performance so that they can strike up the right background music according to the mood of the actors performing the scene. As in the Shakespearean theatre, *likay* audiences are required to use their imaginations extensively. With the little help of backdrop changes to indicate a different scene, *likay* actors are conventionally required to ‘inform’ the audience where they are and what they are doing. In a forest scene, for example, a hero and his young lover might leave from the left side of the stage and moments later reappear from the right side to return to the brightly lit central stage and may pronounce, “We have been travelling in a forest for almost a week now and are very exhausted. The night is approaching and it’s getting dark. My love, I think we should rest here under this big old tree.”

Most *likay* troupes perform old classics from Thai literature, well-known folk tales or folk legends, making use of extensive adaptations, which turn the ‘high-tradition’ classics into light entertainment for popular audiences. Sometimes the troupe may invent the plots of their own stories. However, these new plays do not really deserve to be credited as original creations. They are, most likely, a mixture of a number of successful theatrical elements gathered in one place. The plots in general are not very complex and are very predictable. Most of them deal

with kings, queens and royal princes, love and hatred between two enemy cities, disguise and misunderstanding of royal identity, the adventure of a young prince and sword fighting in a forest, and domestic violence and mistreatment of family members. In brief, the stories are packed with the elements that move the audience to tears and provide them good laughs, all of which conform to what popular audiences expect from a play. Last but certainly not least, as a rule of thumb, all plays must have a happy ending with all the characters reunited, enemies reconciled, and/or wedding celebration so that the audiences can go home with a smile on their faces, but without anything much left for them to ponder about. The hero wins while the villains are defeated and given a chance to reform. Like all Thai classics, the plays always carry the Buddhist principal doctrine of ‘good begets good, evil begets evil’. Although the main objective of *likay* is to provide entertainment not the moral lesson, each character is presented in a way that ‘through their behaviour and temperament underscore and indeed, teach, Buddhist doctrine.’²¹ The good characters portray the precepts of Buddhist virtue which consist of acts of calmness, rightful speech and humble behaviour. The bad characters, on the other hand, demonstrate self-will, aggressive behaviour, and unruly speech.²²

Likay plays also illustrate the order of Thai social hierarchy as the characters range from kings to crooks. *Likay* shows how each different class lives in a reciprocal way with the other: the lower class is to support and protect the upper, while the upper also offers guidance and protection to people of lower

²¹ Carkin, p. 147.

²² Ibid., p. 220.

status.²³ Freedom of speech is allowed so that the lower characters can speak quite frankly to their superior characters and sometime they can even mock and make fun of the noble characters while giving them some witty insights as well. The plays somehow suggest that social mobility in Thai society is possible especially for those from the low-end to move upward through proper service to the established hierarchy.

Unlike modern formal theatre, where the audience is expected to behave in conformity with theatre etiquette, there is no such rule to control audience behaviour in *likay* theatre. Audiences are free to walk in and out the venue, perhaps to buy some snacks from vendors, whenever they want to. They can even chat and laugh with their friends while the actors are performing a sad scene on stage. They can also converse with the actors on stage. This is not regarded as a disruption or a distraction from the play. Sujit Wongtes, a distinguished Thai historian and writer who won a National Artist Award in Literature, offers an insightful remark about the relationship between *likay* drama and Thai popular audiences, saying that the actors and audience always share the same dramatic space. There is no definite line that separates the actors' dramatic world and the audience's real world. Like popular theatre in most cultures, the players tend to communicate directly with the audience: 'the players who play the hero or the villain may, out of the blue, sing a love song to woo a young street vendor-girl or the female audiences [while playing their parts on the stage]', [My translation].²⁴

As the bridge to bond the worlds of the players and the audience together, the role

²³ Ibid., p. 220.

²⁴ Sujit Wongtes, 'Introduction', in *Yeeje Jak Dokdin Thueng Homhuan* [Yeeke: From Dokdin to Homhuan], by Janepop Jobkrabuanwan, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Chao Praya, 1981), p. 62.

of fool or clown is very important. The clown is the real ‘spice’ of *likay* theatre. He is also the one who creates a sense of community and facilitates this shared space with the audience. Not only can he move freely in both worlds, the clown is also the key figure who is capable of reflecting and making fun of all current serious social issues. Most of the time, the issue that the clown is mocking on stage has nothing whatsoever to do with the main plot of the story but audiences seem to enjoy the clowning very much.

The last vital element and somehow the symbol of *likay* theatre is the extravagant costumes in which, according to some *likay* critics, ‘the fantasy is to be found’. Michael Smithies gives a very good description of *likay* costumes saying that

[*Likay* costume is] where imaginative bad taste is allowed to run riot. Never were jewels so gaudy or colours so clashing. Paste and glass ornament every possible part; the few actresses may be dressed more traditionally but with an even heavier encrustation of costume jewellery. For this reason the phrase ‘*Muen Likay*’ [dress like *likay*] is used of anyone who dresses extravagantly or of any gaudy object.²⁵

Likay costumes have been the major attraction drawing audiences to the theatre since the first *likay* playhouse was erected almost a century ago (around 1895-1898). Prince Damrong-rajanubhab, an eminent scholar who is regarded in Thailand as the Father of Thai History, recorded in his memoir his first visit to the first official *likay* playhouse in Bangkok:

²⁵ Michael Smithies, ‘*Likay*: A note on the origin, form, and Future of Siamese folk opera’, *Journal of the Siam Society*, 59 01 03 (1971), p. 41.

Since Phraya Petchapanee opened the first *likay* theatre in front of his own house in the Ratchanadda Temple area, he invited me to see one of the performances. He sat beside me all through the show. I had an opportunity to ask him many questions about the convention of *likay* performance. One of which was how he came up with the idea of these non-traditional and non-typical extravagant costumes [...]. He explained to me that female audiences love that style of costume as they found it really beautiful. They came to the theatre to see [the costumes]. And male audiences came to the theatre just to see girls. [...] ²⁶

[My translation]

According to Phraya Petchapanee, the owner of the first established *likay* troupe in Bangkok, the principal elements which might guarantee the success of a *likay* troupe, apart from having good-looking lead actors and actresses, are (1) beautiful costumes, (2) good comedy scenes and (3) fast-moving plots. These elements have become the heart of Thai popular culture. Even though *likay* may cease to be the most popular source of entertainment for public audiences today, having been replaced by television drama on free television channels, these elements are still regarded as the main ingredients that shape the aesthetic taste of Thai popular audience and can still be seen in every Thai popular soap. Contemporary Thai audiences, not very much different from those who watched dance drama about a century ago, still look for the same source of entertainment materials.

²⁶ Quoted in Wongtes, p. 33-4.

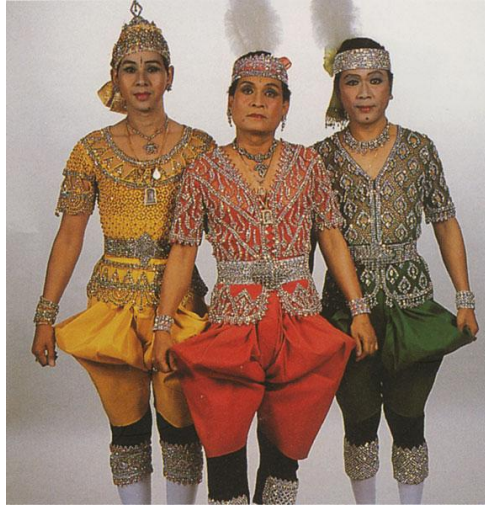


Figure 22 – Traditional *likay* costumes

The fact that Thai popular audiences do not look for exciting new plots can be confirmed by one recent example of a popular play, *Sung Thong* – a well-known classic about a prince who was born from a golden shell. The play has been endlessly re-staged and remade in many different dramatic forms ranging from traditional dance drama and *likay* performances, to movies and television soaps. The most recent version of *Sung Thong* was a television series in 2009. The series was televised weekly for twelve months, longer than other general TV dramas, most of which take about 2-3 months for broadcasting. Although it was a re-telling of a well-known old tale, the series was still very successful in terms of ratings and audiences. It may be worth noting here that although the same old Thai classics like *Sung Thong* are frequently remade and retold in a similar way that Shakespeare's plays are re-staged in the Western world, the key difference seems to lie in the way productions and dramatists in both cultures treat their classic texts. Dramatists recreate Shakespeare's plays based principally on Shakespeare's words. In other words, the 'words' in the original texts are regarded

as the principal material of the production. It is the ‘words’ that offer the room for adapters of Shakespearean dramas to exercise their creativity by looking for new meanings in the same old texts. Praises are showered on the productions and on those writers and directors who find new interpretations and offer new perspectives of the plays in ways that no one has found or presented before. By contrast, in the Thai literary context, Thai classical texts are treated very differently. Although most classic tales, *Sung Thong* for example, are written down and widely read, in practice, Thai dramatists do not treat the ‘words’ in the classic texts as the sacred, essential element nor do they feel the need to preserve the original texts. The original ‘words’ or the original scripts are for those who study literatures; they play a very small role in a real production. In each remade production of *Sung Thong*, for example, there has been a totally new-written script based (sometime very loosely) on the old plot. Sometime new characters are added and new sub-plots are invented. There is nothing much to do with reinterpretation or offering audiences new insights into the original play. The major attraction lies in how the dramatists ‘improvise’ the same old plot and present it in a more ‘fun’ way. It depends on how well the dramatists can interweave new dramatic materials into the old story to make it more exciting.

Andrew Gurr makes an interesting remark about the difference between ‘audience’ and ‘spectator’, which is worth considering here. The audience comes from the Latin word *audire*, to listen, to *audiens*, means hearing. The word audience thus clearly refers to the act of giving a hearing to something. The word ‘spectator’ comes from the Latin *specere*, to see, which give a vivid sense of the visual priority. According to Gurr, “‘Audience’ harks back to its judicial sense of

giving a case a hearing [whereas] ‘Spectators’ belong at football matches here the eye takes in more information than the ear.’²⁷ The main point here is that while Shakespearean theatre and its theatregoers seem to value the hearing of poetic scripts much more than seeing the visual treats on stage, Thai theatregoers opt for the visual experiences. They are more ‘spectators’ than ‘audiences’ in their nature. Of course, Thai audiences love witty words and puns and also enjoy good oration to some extent. However, Thai people are traditionally tuned more for words or speech which is artistically invented. When it comes to theatre, Thai audiences prefer listening to songs or rhyming words rather than long speeches. Music and poetic lyrics (or the ‘scripts’ in the Western sense) are definitely a very important dramatic element; however, they are exploited in order to help complete the perfect illusion of visual beauty on stage. Chetana Nagavajara, a renowned Thai theatre critic, comments on the Thai audiences’ preference for music and songs rather than speech saying that

Thai people when they are on stage cannot help but ‘*Rong Ram Tum-Plaeng*’ [Thai idiom which literally means ‘sing, dance, and make music’]. We are the kind of people who rely very much on poetic sound. To be forced to act in prose spoken plays, [the actors] need to be more focused. It may get even worse in the case that the script is written in verse but [the actors] are forced not to ‘sing’ but

²⁷ Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 86.

‘speak’ as if it was prose. [...] we ‘intentionally’ act in a play but it is not something we can do by our dramatic instinct.²⁸

[My translation]

In his article, Chetana offers the example of Jean Racine, one of the most famous western dramatists and yet a dramatist barely known about by Thai people compared to the canonical Shakespeare. Despite the fact that, in the Western world, Racine is highly regarded as a literary icon, his work has never been translated and staged in Thai. From Chetana’s perspective, Racine’s dramatic style obviously does not fit Thai dramatic aesthetics. His use of ‘tragedie classique’, especially in terms of intense dramatic and emotional presentations, is highly praised in the West. However, his plays lack dramatic plot diversity and stylization to which Thai audiences are accustomed. Concerning the characters in Racine’s plays, Chetana reflects from the perspective of the general Thai audience: ‘they all seem to be very serious and very realistic from the beginning to the end. What we see on stage are those who always put on serious looks and seem fairly content with their seriousness. [My translation]’²⁹ Thai audiences do not accept nor enjoy this style of ‘serious’ play. Although the dramatic unities in Racine’s plays might be acclaimed in Western culture, they could become a weak point in Thai culture. If a Thai audience has to sit and watch one of Racine’s

²⁸ Chetana Nagavajara, ‘Rong Rum Tum Plaeng: Lakhon Baab Thai’ [Sing Dance and Make Music: Characteristics of Thai Theatre], *Krun Kid Pinid Nuek [Immersed in One’s Thoughts]*, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Prapansarn Ltd., 2001), p. 43-4.

²⁹ Nagavajara, p. 84.

tragedies, Chetana speculates, the comment on the play is likely to be, ‘full of talking, [...] when will they stop speaking and start to sing?’, [My translation].³⁰

Similar problems can be found when a popular theatre attempts to stage Shakespeare or any other Western classics, tragedies in particular, most of which are rich in scenes of rhetorical expression. Most Thai Shakespeare productions have attempted to find solutions in order to prolong the concentration of the Thai ‘audience’ who seem very much less enthusiastic about hearing long speeches and to encourage them to be able to focus more on the rhetorical priority of such plays. In this particular case what Shakespeare can offer, which other Western classic writers cannot, is his ‘dramatic universality’. In Shakespeare’s plays, apart from his rhetorical distinction, there are also other essential dramatic devices which could capture the attention of audiences despite their different cultural backgrounds. Shakespeare’s plays are not all about wise words; they employ the diversity of the dramatic plots, lavish costumes, music and songs, jigs and dances, some actions and dumb shows; all of which help release the audience’s tension from serious emotional scenes. These theatrical devices make Shakespeare’s plays more accessible to audiences from totally different dramatic backgrounds than those of other playwrights. In Shakespeare’s plays, one can possibly find what he likes about seeing a play. Shakespeare provides different entertaining bits for everyone to enjoy. It now totally depends on each production as to which specific parts are selected and highlighted in order to attract their target audience.

³⁰ Nagavajara, p. 84.

Chapter X

Thai Popular Soaps and the Use of Allusions to Shakespeare

Soap operas in Thai society

Television drama or television soap operas began to have a significant role in the Thai entertainment business in the late 1950s when stage performance ceased to be the central form of entertainment and gradually became marginalized following the advent of modern mass media – mainly films and television. Although television soaps are widely called in Thai *lakhon nam nao* (murky-water drama) – the term that denotes a disrespectful implication and disdainful attitude toward this dramatic art form – due to their ‘stagnant plots and unsavoury behaviour’,¹ television soaps have been proven to be the most popular and influential dramatic form in Thailand today. On six free television channels in Thailand, more than a hundred soap operas are broadcast daily every year. The record shows that in 2009, there were 113 soap operas on air which made up almost 60 hours per week of air time.² Unlike most television soap operas in the West, most of which may last more than a decade, Thai soaps take approximately 6-7 weeks from the start to the end. New soaps have been filmed all year round with new casts in new locations but with very similar plots and storylines. A whole chapter entitled ‘Soap Opera: Formula TV drama reveals the secret life of

¹ Philip Cornwel-Smith, *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* (Bangkok: Sirivatana Printing Co. Ltd., 2005), p. 239.

² ‘Chumlae “Kwam Roonraeng nai lakhon torrattas thang free television”’ [Reveal “violence in Thai soap opera on free TV channels”], Thai Texts, oknation blog, Sunday 19 July 2010 <<http://www.oknation.net/blog/nity/2009/07/19/entry-> > [accessed 5 November 2010]

Thailand' in *Very Thai: Everyday Popular Culture* by Philip Cornwel-Smith is dedicated to giving a full-length explanation of Thai soap operas from the perspective of a foreigner. Cornwel-Smith observes the impact of Thai television soaps on other popular forms of Thai mass media:

[...] Thai soaps take commercialism to extremes. Multi-purpose celebrities lead the cast, the theme song tops the charts, newspapers carry updates, magazines focus on each soap, talk shows hype must-see moments, and the credits display more logos than the mall.³

Soap operas can attract family members to get together in front of the television set to watch their favourite soaps which then offer colleagues and friends some common topics to chat about daily. Broadcasting a popular soap opera can often, apparently, reduce the amount of traffic in a city as people will rush home to see the show, particularly on the day that some top-rating soaps come to their ending. It is no exaggeration to say that most Thais, no matter what privileged background they are from, can be equally drawn to television soaps. Thaksin Shinawatra, former Thai prime minister, for example, during the peak period of the political turmoil in 2005, gave a joking interview to avoid answering some difficult political questions – by encouraging people to forget the current issue of conflict for the time being and go home to watch the ending of *Plerng Payu*, the top-rating soap opera at that particular time. Television drama is the most affordable and the most conveniently accessible entertainment form in Thailand today. The increasing number of soap opera production houses and the

³ Cornwel-Smith, p. 238.

huge number of soap opera new-born stars confirm that this is the most flourishing entertainment industry in the country.⁴

The first television channel in the country, Thai Television Channel 4 (commonly known as Channel 4 Bang Khun Phrom) was opened in 1955. Although the channel was established with the purpose of serving the government as the new mass media channel to live-broadcast some significant governmental affairs such as the meetings of the Parliament and state news and announcements, it also included some entertainment programmes such as music, traditional dance, and drama. The first Thai soap opera, *Suriyane Mai Yak Taeng Ngan* [*Suriyane Doesn't Want to Get Married*], was broadcast by this channel also in 1955.⁵ The promising new form of mass media expanded very quickly with soaring numbers of television sets in most Thai households within the following decades. By the 1960s, stage performance fell out of popularity and was replaced by films and television soap operas. Since television was still not affordable for most people and also the broadcasting time was quite limited, films gained more popularity than television soaps for they could offer much more variety in terms of plots and stories. In terms of plots, both films and television dramas were adaptations of contemporary famous Thai novels while classic Thai literature, which used to serve as the main source of plots, received much less attention. However, familiar melodramatic themes about love, domestic violence and family conflict, with a clear distinction between the 'goodies' and the bad guys, was still in favour for the Thai popular audience. These early productions of Thai soaps – *Ban Sai*

⁴ Kanokporn Chanasongkram, 'Our Love Affair with Soaps', Real Time Section, *Bangkok Post Newspaper*, Friday 22 May 2009, p. R 1.

⁵ Chanasongkram, p. R 1.

Thong [*Ban Sai Thong Mansion*], *Khun Suek* [*The Warrior*], *Kot Haeng Karma* [*Laws of Karma*], to name a few – have later on become ‘classic’ dramatic pieces which have been remade as television soaps in many different versions.

Regarding acting style, most soaps stars in this pioneering period were former stage stars whose skills in acting inherited much from the traditional drama. Their acting style was based very much on traditional forms and stock acting gestures. Most emotional expressions such as anger, jealousy, and grief were rendered through larger-than-life facial expressions, eye movements and hand gestures. Realistic or naturalistic acting styles, and even sincerity in acting, were not yet heard of. There was no such thing as a drama school which offered acting guidance and training courses. Anyone who was interested in show business or wanted to become an actor somehow had to plough their way into the circle, perhaps by working as a general assistant on the shooting set. Working close to famous stars would allow them to observe, learn and imitate the stock-acting gestures professionally performed by those stars. It was the only way these aspiring new actors would have their acting lesson.⁶ Superb acting skill was proven when an actor could ‘burst into tears and weep in front of the camera right at the moment that they were told to do’.⁷ Apart from their unique acting style, most actors were also accustomed to having someone giving them the lines off-stage; remembering lines was not actually part of their acting responsibility. In the 1960s, soap operas on television were, like other programmes, broadcast live, viewers, therefore, could possibly hear everything behind the camera. They would

⁶ Narong Chanruang, *Petchara Chaowarat: Nang eak nai taa yad num phueng* [*Petchara Chaowarat: Honey Sweet Eyes Superstar*], Thai Texts (Bangkok: Changthong, 2009), p. 88.

⁷ Chanruang, p. 27.

know exactly what the actors had to say before they even started the sentence. This dramatic practice may sound bizarre and does not conform to today's naturalistic acting standard. It was, however, considered acceptable and is still practised, particularly in some traditional theatres in the present day.

The traditional style of acting, based principally on form and format, had been the core of Thai drama until modern drama was introduced in the late 1960s. Since then the concept of acting in Thailand has been transformed drastically to lean more towards Western realistic acting styles. However, the trace of traditional acting can still be seen in Thai television soaps. Cornwel-Smith observes the larger-than-life acting style which seems to be the dramatic norm to which most contemporary Thai soap actors conform: 'Staring and chatter build into frequent histrionics. Arms flail, voices shriek, faces grimace. Meanwhile, an over-dramatised soundtrack tries to drum-up suspense or hint when a scene is funny.'⁸ Ornchuma Yutthawong, one of the most acclaimed acting coaches in the country, finds it the most challenging task to guide novice actors whose concept of 'good quality' acting includes over-the-top gestures and fake emotional expressions such as screaming, crying, and showing rages.⁹

The reason behind this non-typical acting practice perhaps partly lies in the fact that script writing, in Thai drama, was never really considered the chief dramatic element which required special attention. Not only in television soaps, but also in the film-making business, script writing was neglected. Petchara Chaowarat, a legendary film megastar in the 1960s, shares her twenty years of

⁸ Cornwel-Smith, p. 241.

⁹ 'Ornchuma Yutthawong', an interview in *Praew Magazine*, year 29th, Vol. 694, 25 July 2008, Thai Texts, pp. 197-8.

experience working in front of the camera in the Thai silver-screen business confirming that script writing was usually disregarded by the production houses. Some scriptwriters worked spontaneously behind the camera with the filming crews on the day of filming. In some emergency cases, as Petchara recalled, when they could not find a paper on which to write the script, they even had to use a small piece of paper taken from their cigarette pack to write dialogues for the scene right at the moment of shooting:¹⁰

I hardly saw the script before the day of filming, especially when there were many films to shoot at the same time. I did not even know what the story was about. What I would be informed about usually was the title of the movie and the name of the star I would have to pair with. Sometimes they gave me a brief storyline. But in some cases when I worked with some recognizable production companies, they did not even tell me which part I was supposed to play, they just wanted me in the film.¹¹

[My translation]

With no opportunity to study and analyse the character she was supposed to perform before the day of filming like most actors of her days, Petchara thus had to rely very much on the stock acting gestures. She was trained to be quick and spontaneous in front of the camera and strictly followed the instructions of the directors. Her skill in performing emotional scenes, crying scenes for instance, was highly admired by her co-actors: ‘It was amazing. She [Petchara] could burst

¹⁰ Chanruang, p. 25.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 88.

into tears right at the moment she was told to. She does not even need time to build up the emotion'.¹² The lack of careful attention to producing a good script has always been a chief weakness in Thai show business ranging from live theatres and films to television soap operas. Another multi-award-winning Thai soap and film star Sinjai Plengpanit shared a similar experience when she started her career in the entertainment business in 1983:

My first film was a box-office flop. Even the second film did not seem to earn my secure position as a film star. However, whenever I got a role offer from any production companies, my first request was that I would like to see the script [in order to make a decision]. I was thus called 'a snob'. Some directors got mad at me. They said, "Who do you think you are?", "How famous you do think you are?", "How dare you ask to see the script?" My response was to ask how it was possible to perform without the script. So they said, "No one has asked to see the script. Even the megastars, they did not bother to ask for the script!"¹³

[My translation]

The reason behind the fact that most Thai production houses pay less attention to scriptwriting while they put more emphasis on other important dramatic elements – for instance, big-named stars, extravagant settings and magnificent costumes – is, in fact, not very surprising. Everyone working in Thai show business and popular media is well aware of a basic rule. If they want to make a huge profit from the business, they have to offer what the popular

¹² Supan Buranapim, famous actress in the 1960s, quoted in Chanruang, p. 36.

¹³ 'Sinjai Plengpanit', a magazine interview, *Starpics Magazine*, Vol. 768, 1 February 2002, Thai Texts, p. 78.

audiences crave for. The Thai entertainment media, including films, television dramas and the music business, do not aim to serve an international market but a local market which comprises of huge numbers of lower-middle class and working class audiences whose aesthetics or dramatic tastes are quite definite and explicit. Surang Prempre, the executive managing director – the ‘Big Lady-Boss’ – of Channel 7, a Thai free television channel which, for some decades, has had the highest viewer-rating and the best advertisement-selling rate, reveals her secret of the top-rating success: ‘We need to think for *the mass*. What viewers really want to see. We have to really know *the mass* [My translation and italics.]’¹⁴ Surprisingly, different from other multi-million baht¹⁵ organizations which must keep up with changing attitudes and tastes of the audiences, Channel 7 does not rely on any study or research on audiences’ behaviors but on the lessons from their flops in the past: ‘We never do any research. We have done this [producing television soaps] a lot and continuously which put us in the advantageous position. We learn from our failures [My translation]’, Surang adds.¹⁶

Thai soap opera productions as delineated by Cornwel-Smith are quickly-made products, not using very elaborate filming techniques. While some channels finish filming the whole series before broadcast (‘stocked-series’ is what these finished products are usually called), other channels may opt for airing episodes

¹⁴ Sukri Manchaimit, ‘Surang Prempre Chao Mae Chong Jed’ [Surang Prempre Big Lady-Boss of Channel 7], *Positioning Magazine*, July 2007, Thai Texts <<http://www.positioningmag.com/Magazine/Details.aspx?id=50079>> [accessed by 19 December 2010]

¹⁵ Baht is the currency of Thailand.

¹⁶ Manchaimit, <<http://www.positioningmag.com/Magazine/Details.aspx?id=50079>>

within days of being shot, ‘in pandering to ratings and media hype’.¹⁷ This ‘fresh-from-the-shooting-set’ television soap opera, due to the limitation of the filming time, might be poorer in terms of filming quality and scene continuity compared to the ‘stocked-series’, but it responds better and more promptly to the reaction and expectation of the mass audience as the plot and storyline have the possibility of being changed all the time. The channel can order the production team to prolong an episode if the rating is still high; however, in the exact opposite case, the series might be cut short if its rating is too low, to save the channel’s budget. Prawit Maleenon, the ‘Big Boss’ of Channel 3 – the most important rival channel in the Thai soap-operas battle – insists on the principal policy of Channel 3 to have the whole series completely filmed before broadcasting. Nevertheless, he admits that this sometimes puts him into a disadvantageous position to win viewer-ratings:

Channel 7 is much more flexible [in terms of filming process] as it can always change the plots and storylines. The series are filmed within days of broadcasting, so each episode is more up-to-date. They could even persuade famous people of the period to perform in their soaps, Somrak Khamsing¹⁸ for

¹⁷ Cornwel-Smith, p. 241.

¹⁸ Somruk Khamsing is the first Thai boxer who won an Olympics gold medal in boxing in 1996. He suddenly became a celebrity over night and returned home as the hero of the nation. Not long after that he was persuaded by Surang Prempre, the executive producer of Channel 7, to play the lead in a period drama, *Nai Kanom Tom* [*Mr. Kanom Tom, The Legendary Boxer*]. Without any acting experience, Somrak accepted to play the role. The drama became a big hit. Thai audiences seemed not to be bothered by Somrak’s amateurish acting skill as long as they got to see their hero in real life playing a hero in the soap.

instance. It's easy for them to get to the heart of popular audience.¹⁹

[My translation]

Yutthana Lawpanpaiboon, an acclaimed soap opera director whose many works win both top-rating and prestigious drama awards, suggests that Thai drama is an escape from the tensions of the hard lives that most popular audiences usually encounter in reality. Drama takes them to a fantasy world where everything they dream of is possible. Characters in the soaps live the lives and do the things that most popular audiences cannot do in reality, for example driving a luxurious Porsche or slapping someone on the face.²⁰ The dream lifestyle that the upper-class characters live in the soaps allows ordinary viewers to dream. This might also offer a similar answer to the question of why Thai audiences always opt for good laughs when it comes to drama. Nimit Pipittakul, a scholar in Thai dramatic arts, is perhaps right to some extent when he says that Thai audiences do not laugh because they want to laugh but because they want to conceal their sufferings.²¹ From the view of an observer of culture, Cornwel-Smith agrees that Thai drama is the channel that Thai audiences use to release their suppressed tensions: 'Restrained in life by politeness and hierarchy, viewers can sublimate their suppressed feelings through the unrestrained on-screen antics: face slaps, hair pulling, screaming fits, mockery'.²² It is hard to deny that very limited

¹⁹ Manchainimit, <<http://www.positioningmag.com/Magazine/Details.aspx?id=50079>>

²⁰ Yutthana Lawpanpaiboon, a discussion session on the topic 'Becoming a Successful Professional Director', Thailand Media Forum 2009.

²¹ Nimit Pipittakul, quoted in *Palung Karn Vijarn: Sillapa Karn Lakhon [Power of Criticism: Dramatic Arts]*, Thai Texts, ed. by Parichart Jungwiwattanaporn and others (Bangkok: Na Petch Printing, 2004), p. 121.

²² Cornwel-Smith, p. 239.

dramatic genres sell well in the Thai entertainment business, and that most of these are light comedy and romantic melodrama that tell stories of the main characters who are portrayed in one-dimensional and formulaic ways – young, rich, good-looking, and kind-hearted. Only a few dramas dared to break the rules and ventured beyond Thai dramatic norms. Yutthana Lawpanpaiboon, for example, tried to produce a non-typical soap which reflected some social issues about drug addiction and domestic sexual-abuse. His soap, however, was not very successful in terms of viewer ratings. ‘The audience refused it.’ Yutthana admits. ‘They would rather see something more beautiful. [...] I also want to make dramas with good content but it’s hard. There are too many rules.’²³ Pranpramoon, a soap-opera scriptwriting veteran, offers an insightful look into the Thai entertainment business. As a soap scriptwriter, she expresses her discontentment about the limitation of plot creation in Thai drama:

We don’t have the story of a fiftyish doctor who finally realized that the most precious thing in one’s life was to help out desperately poor people in Calcutta. We don’t have the story of a businessman in his sixties who had devoted his life to work and never found out that his wife had been cheating on him and his children became very lonely and unhappy. We don’t have a story of a mother who struggled to help her teenage children to get through their critical period of youngster lives. We don’t have the story of a small worker who worked in a cigarette industry and finally realized how hazardous effect his company put onto the society and started to wrestle with his own employer for the right of his

²³ Yutthana Lawpanpaiboon, Thailand Media Forum 2009.

community. We don't even have romantic-comedy from the perspectives of elderly people – the stories that could be lead-starred by senior veteran actors.

We don't like to talk about history which may raise tensions or conflicts in international relations. [...] We can never ever talk about any topics concerning some esteemed institutions. We don't produce the stories which may upset some professional groups so that the members in the profession may make a complaint [to the channel] for ridiculing and disgracing their career.

As a result, we have only stories that show face-slapping, sexual harassment, young boys fighting to win the love of a young girl, young girls fighting to win a young boy, the poor disguises him/herself as the rich, the rich disguises him/herself as the poor, cross-dressing, revenge, adultery, ghosts, and drag queens.²⁴

[My translation]

Pranpramoon concludes her observation that new plot creations for Thai drama are most likely to be discouraged and turned down by most production houses because the demand of Thai popular audience leans toward the old successes. Some 'legendary' television dramas are remade over and over again with different casts and new settings in a modernized setting and Thai audience seems to never get tired of them. Apart from the fact that the audience loves to see the repeats of their familiar favourite love stories, soap opera sponsors also like to be assured that their investment in the production would not become a profitless waste, for old stories can guarantee the top viewer-rating especially when it perfectly combines with big-named soap stars casting. A well-known makeup

²⁴ Pranpramoon, 'No Part to Play', *VOLUME Magazine*, August 2008, Vol. 079, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Bangkok Printing Co., Ltd.), p. 131.

artist and an editor-at-large of one of the best-selling Thai magazines, Sukhon Srimarattanakul, shares his point of view on this matter saying that: ‘Even though we know what the story is all about, it’s still fun to watch. No matter how many remakes, they always get a high rating. [...] You watched them when you were a kid; now, you’ll be watching another version with children of your own.’²⁵

Regarding Thai actors, it is sad but true to admit that show business in Thailand preserves room for those whose physical appearance prevails over their acting talent. Unfortunately, Thai actors have very short working periods in their acting career. Most of them enter the limelight business when they have just arrived at puberty. Some begin their career and have their television drama debut by performing the leading role in a prime-time soap opera when they might be only fourteen to sixteen years old. There is no need to mention their acting experience, most of them have their first acting lesson on the first day of filming. Basic acting lessons are not compulsory for these novice actors. On the shooting set they may find some senior actors who perform with them in the same scene to provide them with some acting tips and guidance, or they just simply follow the instructions of the director. Casting the right actor who perfectly suits the role in terms of the character’s age and personality comes second after the anticipated high rating that most popular actors can guarantee. It is, therefore, no surprise to see a fourteen-year-old, new-face actress in a role of a mature twenty-five-year-old businesswoman who runs a multi-million baht international company. It is also very common to see some actors or actresses who are in their late twenties play the roles of a father or a mother whose son or daughter in the story is about

²⁵ Chanasongkram, p. R.1.

their real age. Most Thai actors when they reach thirty will find themselves being replaced by the 'new wave'. They may have to accept the need to play some less significant supporting roles otherwise they will be put out of show business with no roles to play at all.

Why does that become a common custom in the entertainment business? As aforementioned, most Thai drama plots are mainly concerned with the love of young beautiful couples. Moreover, the main target audiences who loyally support the local drama products are teenagers and working-class people. The middle-class and the upper-class audiences can afford more sophisticated forms of entertainment so that they somehow turn their back on local products as they no longer satisfy their artistic tastes. Pranpramoon sees this phenomenon as a common social function in a market-oriented society, particularly in a developing country like Thailand. Popular media has to act in response to the demands of mass audiences for business reasons and this leaves very little option for those who are not part of the popular culture:

Our country is not a country with a great social welfare function [especially for elderly citizens]. Elderly people cannot afford to buy things that they like, support classical music, go to concerts that play their favourite kinds of music, or go to traditional dance drama theatre. They do not have any financial power so that the production houses find no need to produce any television dramas, television programmes, fashions, or entertainment products that respond to their demands.²⁶

[My translation]

²⁶ Pranpramoon, p. 131.

Thai soap-opera actors are the principal selling point of the television productions. The idea that the star is the most important element in the drama does not occur only within the Oriental dramatic culture but worldwide in almost all periods. Thai actors have to live up to the expectations of their soap fans even when they are off-screen. Their image is more important than their acting ability if they want to prolong their working period in the business. Thai audiences can be very loyal to their favourite stars. They seem to care less about plot sophistication, new filming techniques and styles of drama as long as their favourite stars are in the show. Inherited customs from traditional dance drama means that most Thai actors are typecast. In the old days, when a dancer/actor began their first training lesson, first of all they would be categorized into one of four different groups – the hero, the heroine, the giant (or the villain), and the monkey (more or less equivalent to the clown in popular drama). The need to put each dancer/actor into a different group is because these dancers would be professionally trained to dance in their cast-category, each of which required almost totally different dance movements. Typecasting is still practised in Thai contemporary drama. Even though it is not a rule that the protagonists cannot play other characters, it is, however, not very common. The actor and actress who always play a hero and a heroine in the soaps may have to risk the opportunity of falling out of the audience's favour and may not be able to come back to play a leading protagonist role again once they have tried their hand at playing a villain's role. They will normally try their best to keep their protagonist image both on and off-screen, not only to prolong their acting career but also to retain their fans' high expectation to

see them behave exactly like the role they play. Suwanan Kongying, a current top-rating soap star who has been in show business for almost twenty years, since she was fourteen years old, accepts that she has to carry the weight of the high expectation of her fans who refuse to see her performing in other roles than that of the leading lady, even in her private life.

People have a fixed image of me as a tearful, introvert and obedient girl just like most characters I've played in the soaps. I can't even wear a short skirt or mini dress for fear of upsetting my fans. I have to always be in the character. No matter who I really am in my real life, I have to behave like the proper leading lady. That's the image that most people have of me.²⁷

[My translation]

The Use of Shakespeare's Plots in Thai Soap Operas

In January 1992, *Rak Nai Roy Kaen* [*Love in Vengeance*], the first television soap opera production by a newly-established production house, 'Exact', was broadcast for the first time. Takonkiet Weerawan, the founder of the production house and also the director of the drama series, intended to create and offer Thai pop audiences a new option in plots and dramatic presentation. A graduate of Boston University, USA, with degrees in Theatre and Communication, and Broadcasting, Takonkiet was more than enthusiastic to bring what he had learned from universities abroad and his twelve-year experiences of the American entertainment culture, including Broadway theatre, to invent

²⁷ Suwanan Kongying, Interview in *Wanwarn Young Warn Yoo* [*Sweet Old Days*], a Thai talk-show programme, broadcast on Channel 7, date 12 February 2010.

something a bit more ‘trendy’ in Thai television. Before the big serious drama project of *Rak Nai Roy Kaen* Takonkiet had tried his hand at two chic sit-com projects: *Nang Fah See Rung* [*Rainbow Angel*] and *Sam Noom Sam Moom* [*Three Boys Three Angles*] in 1991. Gaining a reputation as the trendy production house for the new generation with its dramatic style and presentation which was a mixture of Western and Thai dramatic tastes, Takonkiet’s pioneering sitcom projects were hugely successful. *Sam Noom Sam Moom* in particular, was among the most popular and most-remembered sitcoms and was also one of the longest-running sitcoms of the country.



Figure 23 – *Rak Nai Roi Kaen* [*Love in Vengeance*] poster (1993)

To reinforce the company’s image as the most trendy production house of the period, *Rak Nai Roy Kaen* [*Love in Vengeance*] was designed to shock Thai audiences with its tragic ending. The plot of the drama, Takonkiet admits, was borrowed substantially from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The plot of *Romeo and Juliet* could surely satisfy the Thai audiences’ dramatic appetite for its variety

of emotional scenes such as love-declaring scenes of the young beautiful lovers and heart-breaking disputing scenes between parents and children. But, instead of opting for a reconciliation and a happy ending where all obstacles could be defeated by true love, like other typical Thai soaps, *Takonkiet* kept the tragic death of the main characters as in Shakespeare's original ending. Perhaps this is what made *Rak Nai Roy Kaen* become one of the most memorable soaps in Thai history. *Rak Nai Roy Kaen* or *Love in Vengeance*, as the name suggests, tells an ill-fated love story of a young couple Patyot (Romeo) and Ong-on (Juliet). In an art gallery in central Bangkok, the two fell in love literally at first sight without knowing the fact that they were from wealthy families which had long been major business rivals. But not only had there been disagreement in business, some flashback scenes also revealed that Ong-on's father, before he got married, lost his beloved ex-girlfriend to Patyot's father. The secret love of these young paramours grew so quickly and was strong against all obstacles and all disagreement from their families. To some extent, *Rak Nai Roy Kaen* borrowed from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* quite closely in almost all the major scenes including the legendary balcony scene in which the lovers secretly met and exchanged their love vows. Most characters in the Thai soap opera version apparently resembled those of Shakespeare's original version, although all of them were given Thai names – the Capulet and Montague parents (however, in the Thai version the family names of Capulet and Montague were not stressed as strongly as in Shakespeare's original), Tybalt (in the Thai version, Ong-on's brother), Count Paris (Ong-on's suitor and later to become her fiancé), The Nurse (Ong-on's personal attendant). A few major characters were deleted – Friar Laurence and the

Apothecary, for example – as they were less likely to fit with the modern-day Bangkok setting.

In fact, the tragic plot about star-crossed young lovers is not totally new to Thai drama. One of the most famous Thai classics, known to Thai people as *Lilit Phra Law* [*The Journey of Prince Law*] also tells a very similar story about lovers from two rival families who, in the end, have to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their true love. However, even though a tragic ending with the death of the main characters is not really taboo in Thai dramatic literature, when it comes to staging the play (from the classical piece), the death scene becomes taboo. During the court tradition, staging death scenes was believed to bring bad luck to the theatre troupe. Most Thai tragedies, *Lilit Phra Law* for instance, were rendered in the form of story-telling or staged only some selected happy or love scenes. This dramatic custom is somehow inherited from the past to today so that in Thai drama a horrible gory death scene involving the main characters is hardly visualized.

Rak Nai Roy Kaen, however, broke all the typical dramatic rules of Thai television soaps at that time. Instead of changing the tragic ending to a popular, happy one as some soaps usually did to please the audiences, Takonkiet shocked his soap fans by having Patyot (Romeo) killed by Ong-on's (Juliet's) father. In the last scene of the drama, Patyot, with his brave attempt to plead with Ong-on's merciless father for his lover's hand in marriage, was shot several times (in slow-motion to amplify the shocking effect). Ong-on, who witnessed Patyot being killed by her father, screamed like crazy while struggling to reach her blood-soaked dying lover. The most-remembered moment of the scene was the moment

when Patyot and Ong-on were both lying on the floor. They desperately tried to reach each other to hold hands for one last time, but Ong-on's father struck Patyot's reaching hand, with his foot, to stop him from touching his daughter. This scene stunned Thai audiences and later became one of the most memorable tragic moments in Thai soap opera. Apart from the fact that in Thai culture, feet are considered the lowest and the filthiest part of one's body. It is extremely rude just to point to something with the feet, not to mention to touch people's body parts with them which can be considered as the most offensive remark one could ever make in Thai culture. The Thai audience just could not believe that the villain (in this case, Ong-on's father) would win and even successfully kill the protagonists at the end. Even though Ong-on (Juliet) did not kill herself and die side by side with her Romeo as in Shakespeare's original version in that scene, the very last scene was sadly portrayed and gave a hint of her soon-coming death. Ong-on managed to flee from her arranged-wedding to a small house by the sea where she had spent a few nights with Patyot and where they had consummated their love before he was killed. All alone, she saw the illusion of her dead lover standing in the rain. Slowly she walked toward him in her soaked white wedding dress which left the last impression to the audiences that Ong-on would definitely end her unfortunate life perhaps by drowning herself in the sea, though no particular death-scene was shown.



Figure 24 – The climax scene from *Rak Nai Roy Kaen*

Rak Nai Roy Kaen was a big breakthrough in Thai television dramas as it challenged the most important Thai dramatic norm – to portray the truth of life. Thai audiences are well aware that lives in reality do not always have a happy ending. However, as the strong belief and practice in Buddhism – the nation's main religion – has been a major foundation that shapes social norms, conventions, and mindsets in all aspects of Thai culture, Thai people profoundly believe in the infallible Law of Karma. Karma is the concept that everything that a person commits will always come with the result or effect of those actions. The concept of 'as you sow so shall you reap' is the common notion that is found in many religions and cultures. In Buddhism, however, the concept is the core of

Buddhist doctrine. It gives the whole nation peace of mind when something goes wrong. Of course, in reality, when things seem to go in a contradictory direction against the rule of Karma, one may be intolerant, wanting to see a quick result and even start questioning if the Law of Karma is working at all. In this sense, Thai drama offers them a consolation. In the dramatic fantasy, it always illustrates that even though the villains could get their way and commit extremely malicious acts without anyone (in the story) ever finding out, nevertheless the audiences witness them all, like the eyes of God from which no one can escape. As the villains, no matter how clever they are, always ‘reap what they sow’ at the end of the story, Thai audiences find a peace of mind and a great comfort to go on with their hard lives, with the hope that the good deeds they attempt to practise daily will finally return in a form of a life reward one day. Hence, it is perhaps unfair to jump to the conclusion that Thai popular audiences have a fixed artistic taste only for soothing comedy dramas that create the illusion of a phony perfect world and deny the truth of life. Tragedy is also acceptable as long as it goes in conformity with the ideology of the Law of Karma.

The possibility of Shakespeare’s tragedies being admired by Thai audiences is, presumably, small. Most of Shakespeare’s renowned tragedies (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*) depict stories of a protagonist battling, not just with external conflicts with opponent characters, but with his own unsettling mind, unfulfilled desires, and a wicked consciousness, all of which lead the protagonist to his downfall. The most important point here is that Shakespeare’s tragedies are less likely to become popular among Thai audiences because his tragic protagonists are likely to perform acts that are against Buddhist

rules of Karma. Through his tragedies, Shakespeare does not demonstrate moral ideas which conform to any norms. Shakespeare, after all, does not write simple moral plays so audiences can easily assimilate their moral message. Audiences cannot expect a consistent moral lesson from his plays:

The message of *Macbeth* is that it's a bad idea to kill kings. The message of *Hamlet* is that Hamlet should have killed the King sooner. Othello is doomed because he is too jealous of what he has. Lear is doomed because he is not jealous enough and wants to give away what he has. If this is what Shakespeare is about [giving moral lessons], then he's clearly not very good at it.²⁸

Rak Nai Roy Kaen, the Thai soap opera version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, although it was hugely successful and became one of the most memorable television series of the 1990s, did not achieve the status of a classic piece in Thai television drama. Nor did the re-made version of *Rak Nai Roy Kaen*, about a decade later in 2002, receive a very enthusiastic response from the audience. Thai audiences in general are very keen on seeing remade versions of their favourite classic soaps. They are not easily bored with their old familiar plots. The reasons behind the failure of this re-made version of *Rak Nai Roy Kaen* are various – perhaps the chemistry between the leading stars were not quite right, the updated settings and the new scripts were not quite impressive, or perhaps Thai audiences could not easily be 'shocked' by the hero's tragic death at the end again.

²⁸ O'Toole, p. 2.

Takonkiet is well aware of this fact. After the great success in his early soap productions, he continues to be successful in the television entertainment business. His company 'Exact' renowned in the 1990s as the non-mainstream production house, now leans more and more towards mainstream dramatic norms. Takonkiet admits that he has had to bend his principles to produce more 'mass' television dramas that please wider audiences because, 'there is a paper delivered weekly to our office, which is called the '[viewers'] rating.' Takonkiet explains, 'In the past, even though our 'trendy' television dramas were not very successful in terms of viewers' rating, we could survive. But now we literally can't survive because we lose the benefit in the game of business. We thus have to adapt to serve a bigger group of mass audiences. [My translation]'.²⁹ Although it seems that Takonkiet has moved away from his former 'dare to be different' concept to think more like a businessman in this fiercely competitive television entertainment business, he still holds on to his belief in producing dramas that carry valuable moral messages: 'If we want to convey our philosophical message effectively, we have to start with making fun-to-watch shows. If our plays make audiences fall asleep, the wisest philosophy we put in the play will become completely useless. [My translation]'.³⁰

Shakespeare adaptations, particularly of comedies, have been more frequently found in Thai soap operas. As in many cultures, Thai audiences love good-fun stories which offer a series of characters playing tricks on each other.

²⁹ Somkid Anektaweepon, 'Ronglakhon Haeng Cheewit: Boy Takonkiet Weerawan' [Theatre of Life: Boy Takonkiet Weerawan], *Positioning Magazine*, November 2007, Thai Texts <<http://www.positioningmag.com/magazine/printnews.aspx?id=64860>> [accessed 22 June 2010]

³⁰ 'Interview with Boy Takonkiet Weerawan', *Praew Magazine*, 31: 725 October 2009, Thai Texts, p. 240.

The fun is often multiplied when the tricksters get tricked themselves. The uses of disguise and mistaken identity are more than common in Thai soaps. In fact, it is really hard to pinpoint exactly from which of Shakespeare's comedies Thai dramas 'loosely borrow' his plots. Perhaps, we never borrow Shakespeare's plots at all as these plots are universal and can be found in dramatic classics in almost every culture; or if we do borrow the plots from Shakespeare, Thai audiences would hardly recognize this as general knowledge about Shakespeare's plays in Thailand is quite limited. However, it may be less important to be able to identify Shakespeare's plays in the disguise of Thai soap operas than to realize that Shakespeare can still offer Thai audiences the plays that please their dramatic appetites, against the long-term myth that Shakespeare's plays are confined in the high culture domain where there is no access for common audiences.

One example of a loose adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy in a format of a Thai soap opera is the story of *Taddao Bussaya* [*The Story of Taddao Bussaya*]. Published in 1960 as a melodramatic novel, this has been produced in many different formats in the Thai entertainment media ranging from radio drama to many re-made soap opera versions. It is interesting to note that the plot of *Taddao Bussaya*, to some extent, resembles Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* particularly the main part concerning the heroine's disguise as a boy servant to allow her to enter the service of the noble hero (as Shakespeare's heroine, Viola, fell for her Duke Orsino when she was in disguise as his boy page and had to conceal her feeling for him). The story of *Taddao Bussaya*, however, does not centre on the other main plot of mistaken identity between a twin brother and sister as in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, although mistaken twin identity is a common main

plot in many Thai soap operas as well. It might not sound very convincing to jump to the conclusion that the story of *Taddao Bussaya* is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* simply because both stories share a coincidentally similar main plot. One might argue that the story of a girl disguised as a boy is one of the most universal dramatic plots which can be found in every culture, including in Thai classic literature. My point here is that despite the fact that Shakespeare is regarded the symbol of high dramatic culture, his comedies engage in plots that most Thai popular audiences are very familiar with and usually enjoy. Perhaps the only problem that leads Thai audiences to shy away from Shakespeare is the name 'Shakespeare' itself.



Figure 25 – The cast from the Thai soap *Taddao Bussaya* (2009)

The Use of Allusions to Shakespeare in Thai Soap Operas

Allusions to Shakespeare in the Thai mass media may not be very frequently exploited but they are found widely scattered in Thai soap operas. In answering one of the most complicated question ‘What is Shakespeare doing in popular culture?’, a very similar question can be raised, ‘What is Shakespeare doing in Thai soap operas?’. Douglas Lanier offers a simple but sound answer: ‘[we need to] recognize that these [Shakespeare] allusions are *doing something*.’

31

To start with, one of the most important observations here is that Shakespeare’s allusions have rarely been used in Thai media unless they have been related to Western-style live stage performances. In other words, in almost all Thai soap operas when it comes to the scene that represents a spoken stage performance, Shakespeare’s plays are among a very few choices to be staged, even though this ‘Shakespeare-play-within-the-soap’³² does not contain a single word written by Shakespeare. The name of Shakespeare and some selected famous scenes from his plays have been massively exploited with little concern for the original text or fidelity to Shakespeare’s scripts. Shakespeare’s plays, and allusions to his plays in Thai soap opera, are used exactly like the concept that Fredric Jameson calls a ‘vanishing mediator’ – the mediator (in this case, Shakespeare’s plays) is unrecognized or somehow totally disappears once the

³¹ Lanier, p. 16.

³² This term is inspired by Richard Burt’s newly-created term ‘The Shakespeare-play-within-the-Indian-film’ which he frequently uses in his article, ‘All that remains of Shakespeare in Indian film’, *Shakespeare in Asia: Contemporary Performance*, eds. Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

required ideas or particular images are successfully formulated.³³ In a similar case of Shakespeare-within-Bollywood-films, Richard Burt explains this common phenomenon of Shakespeare as a vanishing mediator that ‘Shakespeare performs their own obsolescence, (dis)appearance, and ruination by sometimes becoming marginal to the point of being invisible and insignificant’.³⁴

Shakespeare in general Thai reception is inseparable from Western-style stage performances, particularly ones confined within the circle of the educated elites. In the article, ‘Aesthetics with brand? Looking at Thai contemporary theatre: in consumer culture’, Duangkamon Na-pombejra offers an insightful observation about the relation between Thai modern-stage theatre and consumer culture. Duangkamon points out that Western-style theatre in Thailand is in itself a ‘brand’ which represents the high culture and superior tastes of Thai elites.³⁵ Spoken stage plays in Thailand have never been a mainstream entertainment form in the Thai mass entertainment business. Professional stage plays are very much less frequently produced and less frequently seen by popular audiences compared to other easily accessible forms of mass media such as television soaps and movies. Mostly, spoken plays are staged on special festive occasions or, sometimes, for charitable purposes; in this case, most will be performed by amateur, elite actors. Hence, spoken plays have a fixed image representing the type of drama which is performed by elites, appreciated by elites, produced by

³³ Quoted by Richard Burt, ‘All that remains of Shakespeare in Indian film’, p. 74.

³⁴ Burt, p. 74.

³⁵ Duangkamon Na-pombejra, ‘Aesthetics with Brand? Looking at Thai Contemporary Theatre: in Consumer Culture’, *Journal of Arts Chulalongkorn University: Sanook Nuk Piluk Karn Lakhon*, 34:2 July-December 2005, Thai Texts (Bangkok: Chulalongkorn University Press, 2005), p. 54.

elites only on auspicious occasions and choosing stories based on classical pieces of both Thai and Western literature. In short, spoken plays are very likely to be intellectual and almost incomprehensible. The recent opening in 2007 of a new ‘Broadway-standard’ private-run playhouse in the centre of Bangkok – the Muangthai Rachadalai Theatre – to house spectacular yet costly stage productions, emphasizes the fact that stage plays are now becoming a new ‘trendy’ form of mass entertainment. They are, however, still preserved for mainly middle-class audiences who have Western dramatic tastes and can afford expensive tickets.

In Thai soap operas, when it comes to the scenes which involved a stage play, the ‘brand’ of spoken plays is used as a mean to emphasize the sense of the characters’ superiority in every possible aspect. The Thai soap operas *Nueng nai Suang* [*You’re the one*] (1992) and *Look Tarn Loi Kaew* [*My Sweet Palm-Seed Syrup*] (1998) can exemplify the point. In these two romantic-comedy series, stage plays were exploited and interwoven into the sub-plot as the mean to bring the hero and the heroine into closer union, for their passion could be easily triggered and cultivated during the rehearsal of a play. Both television dramas illustrate the point that stage dramas were a preserved zone for elite characters with superior qualities. The heroes and the heroines of both series, without any acting experience, were asked to lead-star in the plays (which were specially organized for some charitable purposes) for two main reasons: first, they were the son and daughter from noble wealthy families; and secondly, they were both outstandingly good-looking. No competitive audition was required for the main character to win the leading-roles in the plays, as their looks alone could earn

them the main parts. One scene from *Nueng Nai Suang* shows that the director of the stage play within the drama just took a quick glance at the hero who, by chance, was walking pass the rehearsal room. The director then quickly whispered to his stage assistant, ‘Who’s that guy? That good-looking chap. Do you think he’d join our cast to play the leading role?’ [My translation]

Undoubtedly, Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is the most frequently used in the genre of Shakespeare-play-within-the-soaps. Thai popular soaps depict love stories of young, beautiful couples. *Romeo and Juliet*, which symbolizes adolescent passion and a sense of youthful rebellion, perfectly suggests an allegory of the victory of true love. Even though allusions to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* are frequently and clearly mentioned, Shakespeare’s original text is almost never quoted accurately. Even the name of Shakespeare as the playwright of the play is hardly mentioned or credited. Another romantic-comedy soap *Chao Sao Klua Fon* [*The bride who is afraid of the rain*] (2004) illustrates this point. The soap refers to many famous scenes from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*; however, the original text is totally disregarded and completely different dialogues occur between Romeo and Juliet in selected scenes that are newly-written in Thai with no resemblance to Shakespeare’s authentic lines. Three major scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* are illustrated in the drama: the ball scene, the wedding scene, and the death scene. Unwilling to join the cast and to play the roles of Romeo and Juliet, Ratnin (the hero) and Parawee (the heroine), who did not get along very well the first time they met, were put into the difficult position of performing on stage as passionate young lovers, against their wills. Ratnin and Parawee stole a second or two behind the stage curtain to attack one another

verbally and somehow managed to play stupid tricks on each other while performing on stage. However, as they moved on to perform the wedding scene and the death scene (when Juliet stabbed herself with a dagger), the audiences noticed that the ‘magic of drama’ gradually took control of Ratnin and Parawee so that they started to be truly ‘in’ their characters. So audiences were given a clue and could anticipate that Ratnin and Parawee would eventually become madly in love as the characters of Romeo and Juliet they were performing on stage.



Figure 26 – Scenes from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* portrayed in the Thai soap *Chao Sao Klua Fon*

In the case of *Chao Sao Klua Fon*, as in many other Thai soaps that make good use of allusions to, and materials from, Shakespeare's famous texts for their own dramatic achievement, little respect was paid to Shakespeare's original script. Soap script writers, directors, and even audiences are not particularly keen on finding the true meaning or even attempting a search for a new interpretation of Shakespeare's texts. They just select dramatic elements and exploit them. As Douglas Lanier puts it:

[T]hey [popular audiences] fasten on (and even embellish) some elements and ignore others; they fragment plays and reassemble what they select into something that speaks to their own sense of lived experience.³⁶

Another example of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* being exploited in Thai soap opera is found in a very recent television drama, *Sakoonka* [*Raven Blood*] broadcast in May 2009. In this television series, the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* was used as one of the important dramatic components of the series' main plot. The heroine, Dao, a poor but outstandingly beautiful young girl (whose secret of her birth identity had not been revealed), was chosen to play Juliet in a school all-female-cast production. Of course, it is because of her beauty not her acting talent that she gets the part. As her female student friend, who was to play Romeo, was ill on the day of the rehearsal, Dao rehearsed the lines by herself, alone in a school garden. Pongsakorn, the hero, a young handsome school patron who has also financially sponsored this school play production, had been invited

³⁶ Lanier, p. 52.

to see the rehearsal. Walking pass the garden, he found Dao struggling with the lines so he offered to help her with the rehearsal by reading the lines of Romeo for her. The hero and heroine, while reading lines (taken from King Vajiravudh's translated version of *Romeo and Juliet*) from the Ball scene in which Romeo and Juliet share their first intimate meeting and exchanged the 'kiss by the book', were entranced by the magic of drama. However, as in most Thai soaps in which the display of lip-kissing scenes between the main characters is likely to be avoided due to social norms, Pongsakorn and Dao's 'palm-to-palm kiss' as in the original *Romeo and Juliet* scene was displayed instead. It is a significant sign that tells the audiences that the hero and the heroine were now at the beginning and would embark on their journey of love.



Figure 27 – Rehearsal of a scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in Thai soap opera, *Sakoona* [*Raven Blood*]

Another function of a Shakespeare-play-within-a-Thai-soap has less to do with Shakespeare's plot but more to do with the role of stage performance (which most of the time is presented through Shakespeare's plays) in the Thai audiences' perception. Stage performances or, more specifically, Western-style spoken plays are the dramatic form which can be seen on special occasions (mostly for charitable causes or in educational institutions). Thai popular audiences do not normally go to the theatre as a part of their common cultural activities. To be on stage as a cast member of a stage play means the opportunity to be exposed to the public's eyes. The stage play is, thus, commonly used to emphasize the state of being superior and distinctive as it offers the opportunity for the main characters (especially the heroine) to be spotted by the public and to stand out from the crowd. An outstanding physical appearance is one of the most important qualities of the heroine in Thai drama, aside from displaying virtuous behavior. Without the heroine's awareness, her beauty is actually the first and foremost quality for her to attract the hero (and most of the other male characters in the story). In *Sakoonka* [*Raven Blood*], this dramatic function is clearly demonstrated through some stage-performance scenes. On the day of the performance, all of the heroine's suitors, including the hero, were at the theatre to see the performance. Dao, the heroine who played Juliet, made her first entrance onto the stage responding to the Nurse's call – 'How now! Who calls?' The moment she appeared on the stage, the lighting changed to provide a spotlight shining at her, enchanting music played, and the camera filmed in slow-motion zooming closer to her attractive face and figure. The scene was followed by a series of male

characters, particularly the hero, expressing their stunned response to the heroine's stage charms and beauty.



Figure 28 – A scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in Thai soap opera, *Sakoonka* [*Raven Blood*]

It is important to note here that this dramatic function can also be portrayed through stage performances apart from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In some Thai soap operas, classical pieces of Thai traditional drama are chosen to make the exact same effect in a very similar pattern – the heroine makes her entrance onto the stage in a magnificent costume and beautiful make-up and stuns all the male characters with her charms. The reason Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has been one of the most popular choices is perhaps because, among all

Shakespeare's plays and other Western classics, *Romeo and Juliet* is the most familiar play and most Thai audiences have heard of the play and know the plot well. The character of Juliet is also renowned for her young and beautiful appearance. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* thus performs perfectly as the vanishing mediator in which Shakespeare becomes marginalized, or disappears completely, while his invented characters are exploited to achieve totally different dramatic goals.

The role of Shakespeare's plays as a vanishing mediator in Thai soap opera is clearly demonstrated in yet another Thai drama series, a ghost story, *Jan Aey Jan Jao* [*Dear Moon*] (2006). This is a story of a school girl who is followed by the ghost of a lady who has been murdered by the girl's grandfather a long time ago and wants revenge for the murder. Jan Jao, the heroine, has encountered this ghost many times but cannot tell anyone as she is the only person who has seen the ghost. One day, Jan Jao takes part in a school play production of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, playing the leading female role of Portia with her whole family, including her grandfather, attending the show. Jan Jao somehow loses concentration and struggles with the lines while performing on the stage as she sees the ghost – sometimes sitting among the audience and sometimes appearing on the stage.



Figure 29 – A poster of *Jan Aey Jan Jao* [Dear Moon] (2006)

Many selected scenes from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* were staged in this soap drama: Antonio borrowing money from Shylock, Portia's suitors selecting the caskets, Portia in disguise as Balthasar in the Venice Courtroom, and the trial scene. All the lines rendered by actors were taken from King Vajiravudh's Thai version of *Venit Vanit* [*The Merchant of Venice*]. Most of the lines, especially the Thai translation of the famous 'mercy speech',³⁷ were familiar to most Thai audiences. However, the purpose of staging these scenes in *Jan Aey Jan Jao* has almost nothing to do with the plot of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. The intention is to put the main character into a vulnerable, helpless situation from which she could not escape and could not cry for anyone's help, despite the fact that she was among a big crowd of people. The heroine was performing a role on stage where she had the whole audience in the auditorium as her witnesses. Even though the audiences noticed the unusual behaviour of the

³⁷ 'The quality of mercy is not strained...', *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i.

heroine on stage which also interrupted the smoothness of the play, for example, forgetting lines, looking nervous and frightened, and even having sudden severe stomachache (due to the fact known only to her that the ghost had played hurtful tricks on her) – no one could offer her help.



Figure 30 – A scene from *Jan Aey Jan Jao* [Dear Moon] (2006)

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* became almost invisible in this context. In fact, in order to create this thrilling dramatic effect, any stage drama could serve. But staging scenes from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, perhaps, suited the best in this case, as it allowed the main focus in most of the important scenes to be the female leading character.



Figure 31 – A scene (Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Venice Court scene) from *Jan Aey Jan Jao* [Dear Moon] (2006)

The exploitation of allusions to Shakespeare and his plays in Thai soap operas are also found serving other dramatic functions including as the means to exemplify and magnify the protagonist character’s ‘proper’ qualities. Protagonists in most Thai dramas in the present day can be seen as the transformation (or the modern version) of the archetypes from the dance drama tradition. The *phra ek*

(leading man), a handsome adolescent righteous prince in traditional dance drama, is now typically portrayed as a young, smart, and wealthy heir from an upper-class family. Although the character of the hero might be modernized to fit the modern day setting, the Thai hero, more or less, still personifies the Thai ideal of manhood and manifests proper masculine characteristics. In a similar way, the character of the *nang ek* (leading lady) represents the Thai ideal for womanhood which, according to Gary Carkin, ‘exhibiting the Buddhist virtues of right behaviour, right speech, and right thought.’³⁸ In the past, the heroine is typically a princess or a member of an aristocratic family; in modern-day Thai dramas, the heroine is frequently presented as a Cinderella-like character: a delicate and refined young girl who was born in a poor humble family and has been unjustly treated by some wicked characters who are jealous of her charm and virtue. Today, the ‘proper’ qualities of the protagonists seem to be less manifested through their righteous manners and great sense of morality but more through their social status, physical appearance, and educational background. It has somehow become a dramatic norm in modern Thai soap operas to portray protagonists who have a high level of education. Most of them are represented as ‘Nuk-reaan Nok’ [students educated abroad] who have great taste and good knowledge of Western culture. This ‘protagonist quality’ is sometimes demonstrated via scenes that allow the main characters to converse with foreigners in fluent English. As being ‘properly westernized’ becomes one of the good qualities for Thai drama protagonists, a main character who was not born into the upper-class and could not afford to be educated abroad, must also show

³⁸ Carkin, p. 160.

that, to some extent, they have a proper Western education. In the latest version of a period drama *Baan Sai Thong* [*Baan Sai Thong Mansion*] (2000), one of the most well-known classic pieces of Thai soap opera, the heroine Pojamarn – despite the fact that she was born to, and raised by, a humble family – went to a female convent school run by Western Catholic nuns. In many Thai series, particularly the period and costume dramas, female convent schools represent the best Western education for female characters. In one particular scene from *Baan Sai Thong*, the heroine takes part in a school performance. This time she does not play Juliet in the school play; however, the death scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was staged and played by other students who recited the original lines in English, giving a hint and an impression to the audiences that the heroine must also have a strong educational background as she also had been educated in this English-pedagogical school. Although Pojamarn does not play Juliet, her 'westernized' image is illustrated through a scene in which she takes part as a talented pianist playing impressively in a school concert. Being able to play the piano, which is widely regarded as a high-class Western musical instrument, also helps magnify the 'proper' image of the female protagonist.





Figure 32 – A death scene from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in Thai soap opera, *Baan Sai Thong* [*Baan Sai Thong Mansion*]

In conclusion, even though the answers for the question, ‘What (exactly) is Shakespeare doing in Thai popular soap operas?’ can be various, and also can be demonstrated through a range of different examples, Shakespeare and the allusions to his plays are found being exploited for one main reason – to help in creating and magnifying dramatic functions in Thai soaps. Not only do scenes from Shakespeare’s plays and allusions to his famous characters help by setting the right mood to Thai soap scenes, these allusions also help in creating ‘proper’ images of the main characters. Shakespeare thus becomes an effective ‘vehicle’ to represent the superiority of the Western culture as a whole. Shakespeare’s original inventions – his scripts, plots and characters –, however, are less likely to be regarded as significant, and most of the time, are ignored completely. Soap opera producers find no need to keep fidelity to Shakespeare’s texts and even exercise their ‘artistic licence’ to make alterations of Shakespeare’s plots and his characters to some extent. It is not a Shakespeare’s play they are attempting to produce, after all.

Conclusion

The most interesting aspect of learning about staging Shakespeare in different cultures is how diverse the theatrical presentations, stylizations, and interpretations of a Shakespeare's play can become. With Shakespeare as the shared, common ground, each different dramatic culture has space to represent its theatrical identity through Shakespeare's works. Indeed, Shakespeare's dramatic work is now regarded as a public property from which new meanings and new ways of theatrical presentation are sought tirelessly by directors around the world. 'Authentic Shakespeare' has become more and more difficult to define and has, perhaps, become a less significant concern to a new generation of directors. For contemporary Asian directors, the concern to preserve the classical texts of Shakespeare is even less significant than for directors in the West. For Asian directors, finding new meanings from Shakespeare's plays, according to James R. Brandon, is perhaps not as important as 'writ[ing] contemporary meanings [based on their diverse dramatic backgrounds] into Shakespeare.'¹ It is not a surprise, after all, to hear some comments from Western dramatists and scholars, who have experience of seeing some Asian Shakespearean productions: 'This is not Shakespeare as we know him'. Of course not, and it is not supposed to be so. This is Shakespeare as we, Asian dramatists and audiences, attempt to understand and represent his works through our dramatic patterns. This is Shakespeare in the process of our appropriation – through our eyes and minds – so that Shakespeare can make more sense to our target audiences. Shakespeare is, of course, distorted

¹ Brandon, 'Other Shakespeare in Asia: An Overview', p. 34.

to some extent. But isn't it also the case that Western dramatists can learn better and more deeply about different dramatic traditions through something they are already well-familiar with?

The big gap between Shakespearean theatre and Thai theatre is, perhaps, the way Shakespeare presents his plays through the effective use of his rhetoric. This does not mean the Shakespearean 'old' English that Thai dramatists and audiences find it very difficult to understand, but rather the way that most of Shakespeare's plays are presented mainly through verbal speech and dialogue. Thai (or Siamese) theatre, as most dramatic cultures in Asia, is more engaged with visual effects than the use of language. Spoken plays have been introduced and practiced in Thailand only a century ago, with the transformation of traditional dance drama. Hence, Thai audiences are still very much dependent on the help of non-verbal dramatic elements, such as music, song and dance, to understand and enjoy a play. Under these conditions, Shakespeare's texts must be reduced, paraphrased, reconstructed to fit into the mode of communication in a different dramatic culture and the target audience's frame of reference. In the Thai tradition, drama and theatre play a major role to soothe, and to fulfil the need for fun and pleasure. Thai audiences basically seek for '*Sanuk*' – or fun – when it comes to theatre and drama. *Sanuk* provides the Thais with a standard of values in which their commitment to any activity (going to theatre, for example) depend on the immediate fun and pleasure they receive as a reward for their actions. The concept of *Sanuk* thus functions both as a reflection of the tastes and characteristics of the Thai audience, and also reflects their view of the world and their ideologies of life. This concept also shapes the Thai way of thinking in

which nothing is worth doing, seeing or getting involved with unless it has the potential for fun.² Unsurprisingly, the sporadic numbers of Shakespeare's plays staged in the history of Thai theatre are comedies; Shakespeare's tragedy and history are apparently a less preferable choice which most commercial theatre companies do not dare to produce as they would risk financial loss. Some of Shakespeare's tragedies, when staged, had to be adapted massively (for example, the production of *Hamlet the Musical* in 1995 and *Hamlet: A Techno Drama* in 2009), in order to make them more 'Sanuk'.

The new challenge in Thai theatre today is the opportunity to see a greater variety of international productions of Shakespeare, along with the opportunity to share Thai productions at an international level. Most of the local productions in Thailand are, of course, the products of extensive interpretation and adaptation by Thai directors, who know well what elements to select and what might be best suited to a Thai audience's background. It is interesting to see the reactions and hear the comments about the Thai Shakespearean productions from foreign audiences with different dramatic backgrounds. With modern theatres equipped to an international standard in Bangkok today, and contemporary Thai audiences who have more background knowledge and are increasingly open to Western drama, it would also be very interesting and a great opportunity to see Shakespearean productions by Western theatre companies (The Royal Shakespeare Company, for example) in Thailand. Such a cultural exchange has the potential to open up the future of Thai-Shakespeare productions and to enable the two cultures to learn more from each other.

² Polachan, Wankwan, *Thai Comic Performance* (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 2002), pp. 7-8.

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Personal Interviews

Interview with Damkerng Thitapiyasak, the director of *Hamlet: the Techno Drama* (2009), on 14 March 2009.

Interview with Nopamat Veohong, the translator of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* on which *Payu Pirote* (2007) was based, on 20 January 2007.

Interview with Pawit Mahasarinand, the director of *Payu Pirote* (translated from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), on 25 January 2007.

Interview with Sarawanee Sukhumwat, the translator of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* on which *Hamlet the Musical* (1995) production was based, on 18 March 2009.

Appendix

Chronology of Shakespeare Translations in Thailand

Translator	Source Text	Thai Title	Translation Format	Year of Publication
1. Prince Narathip Prapanpong	1.1 Charles and Mary Lamb's <i>Tales of Shakespeare: 'Romeo and Juliet'</i>	<i>Romeo Lae Juliet</i> [<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>] <u>Note:</u> No existence of the manuscript or printed copies	Narrative prose / Adaptation	Approx. between 1890-1893
	1.2 Charles and Mary Lamb's <i>Tales of Shakespeare: 'Comedy of Errors'</i>	<i>Long Lai Dai Pleum</i> [<i>Enchanted</i>] <u>Note:</u> No existence of the manuscript or printed copies	Narrative Prose / Adaptation	1893
2. Luang Thammapimon	Charles and Mary Lamb's <i>Tales from Shakespeare: 'The Merchant of Venice'</i>	<i>Vinis Vanit Kham Chan</i> [<i>The Merchant of Vinis: The Poem</i>]	Narrative Poem / Adaptation	1916
3. King Vajiravudh of Siam	3.1 Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	<i>Venit Vanit</i> [<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>]	Complete translation with prose and verse format as found in the original text.	1916

	3.2 Shakespeare's <i>As you like It</i>	<i>Tam Jai Tan</i> [<i>As You Like It</i>]	Complete translation with prose and verse format as found in the original text.	1921
	3.3 Shakespeare's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	<i>Romeo Lae Juliet</i> [<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>]	Complete translation with prose and verse format as found in the original text.	1922
	3.4 Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i>	4.1.1 <i>Phraya Ratchawangsan</i> [<i>General Ratchawangsan</i>] 4.1.2 <i>Bot Sepa Phraya Ratchawangsan</i> [<i>General Ratchawangsan: The Narrative Poem</i>]	Dance drama playscript //Adaptation Narrative Singing Poem (adapted from <i>Phraya Ratchawangsan</i> dance drama playscript)	1925 (1 st publication) Note: King Vajiravudh finished the translation in 1911 but his translation was not published until 1925. So, technically, this is actually his first translation (adaptation) of Shakespeare's play.
4. Dussadeemala	Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Fun Na Kuen Klang Rudoo Ron</i> [<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>]	Complete translation with prose and poem format as found in the original text.	1946

5. Prapat Watthanasarn	Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Macbet</i> [<i>Macbeth</i>]	Complete translation with prose and verse format as found in the original text.	Approx. 1937-1957 Note: The translation of the playscript was staged by a professional theatre troupe (Phagawalee Theatre Troupe) between 1947 - 1956. But the first publication of the script was later in 1957.
6. Nit Thongsopit	Shakespeare's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	<i>Romeo - Juliet</i>	Complete translation in prose.	1957
7. Rattanaorn Krairuek Yunipan	Shakespeare's <i>Twelfth Night</i>	<i>Ratree thee Sip Song</i> [<i>Twelfth Night</i>] Note: I cannot find an original copy of the book. But I found a few photos of the original book taken some time ago. The photo shows the front cover with the	Complete translation in prose.	1966

		publication details. Some other photos show the first few pages of the book, from which I assume the translator's choice of translating format.		
8. Taweeporn	Shakespeare's <i>Julius Caesar</i>	<i>Kawee Nipon Julius Caesar</i> [<i>Julius Caesar: the Poem</i>]	Complete translation in a poem.	1968
9. Nopamat Veohong	9.1 Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>	<i>Macbet</i> [<i>Macbeth</i>]	Complete translation in prose.	1994
	9.2 Shakespeare's <i>Twelfth Night</i>	<i>Hunsa Ratree</i> [<i>A Merry Night</i>]	Complete translation in prose.	1995
	9.3 Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	<i>Ratree Nitmit Klang Kimhun</i> [<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>]	Complete translation in prose for staging purposes.	Never been published but was staged in 1997. Note: The translated script was kindly given by the translator herself.

	9.4 Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i>	<i>Payu Pirote</i> [<i>Raging Storm</i>]	Complete translation in prose for staging purposes.	Never been published but was staged in 2007. Note: The translated script was kindly given by the translator herself.
10. Sarawanee Sukhumwat	Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Hamlet</i>	Complete translation in prose for staging purposes.	Never been published but was staged in 1995 (the production is entitled <i>Hamlet the Musical</i>).

Chronology of Shakespeare Productions in Thailand

Date/ Year of Production	Production	Production Detail	Theatre Company
1897	<i>Venit Vanit</i> [<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>]	<p>An excerpt from King Vajiravudh's translation of Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , (The Venetian Court Scene)</p> <p>Note: The group of elites which consisted of western-educated royal family members and court civil servants staged the court scene from Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> (when Shylock and Portia had a dispute over the life of Antonio). The play was performed on the celebrated occasion of the return of King Rama V (King Chulalongkorn, reigned 1868-1910) to Siam after his royal visit (the first Grand Tour) to Europe in 1897.</p>	Amateur Elite Theatre Troupe in Siam court
Approx. between 1911 -1924	<i>Phraya Ratchawangsan</i> [<i>General Ratchawangsan</i>]	<p>Excerpts from King Vajiravudh's adaptation of King Vajiravudh's adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> in Thai dance drama.</p> <p>Note: King Vajiravudh notes in the preface of the first publication of</p>	Royal Theatre Troupe

		<p><i>Phraya Ratchawangsan</i> that only two scenes from his adaptation were staged during his lifetime: the first scene is from Bua Pan's (Desdemona) elopement with Phraya Ratchawangsan (Othello) for their secret marriage to the scene in which Somdet Phra Wikrom (the Duke of Venice) urges the reconciliation between Bua Pan's father and Phraya Ratchawangsan ; the second scene starts when Phraya Ratchawangsan leaves Sriwichai (Venice) to command the armies against invading pirates and ends with the celebration scene of his victory in the war.</p> <p>The murder scene when Phraya Ratchawangsan kills his wife Bua Pan has never been staged since then. In Thai dramatic convention it is considered taboo to present a death scene of the main characters on stage.</p>	
Approx. between 1947-1956	<i>Macbet Poo Torrayos</i> [<i>Macbeth the Traitor</i>]	Based on Prapat Watthanasarn's translation of Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>	Phagawalee Theatre Troupe, at Sala Chalermthai Playhouse, Bangkok.
1964 (10-12 Sept)	<i>Hamlet</i>	Note: The production did not state whose translation formed the basis of the script.	Bangkok Dramatic Society
1979 and 1982	<i>Kimhun ta nimit</i> [<i>A Dream in Summer</i>]	Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> in modern interpretation	Thammasart University Production

1980	<i>The Gang</i>	adapted from the musical <i>West Side Story</i> , an adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	Thammasat University Production Note: the production was directed by Mattani Ratnin (a professional theatre director and also a Theatre professor at Thammasat university)
1982	<i>Mong Pa Maha Burut</i> [<i>Mong Pa the Great Man</i>]	Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i>	Thammasat University Production Note: the production was directed by Mattani Ratnin (a professional theatre director and also a Theatre professor at Thammasat university)
1989	<i>Hunsa Ratree</i> [<i>A Merry Night</i>]	Based on Noppamas Veohong's translation of Shakespeare's <i>Twelfth Night</i>	Chulalongkorn University Production Note: the production was also directed by Noppamas Veohong. She is a professional theatre director and also a Theatre professor at Chulalongkorn university.

1989	<i>Rak Nee Mee Raka</i> [<i>Cost of Love</i>]	Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Thammasat University Production Note: the production was directed by Mattani Ratnin (a professional theatre director and also a Theatre professor at Thammasat university)
1990 (28 June)	<i>Venit Vanit</i> [<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>]	Based on King Vajiravudh's translation of Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> The production was staged at the Thailand Cultural Centre, 1990	Thai Dance Academy School Theatre Troupe
1990	<i>Fah Ruang</i> [<i>The Fall of Sky</i>]	Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i>	Thammasat University
1990	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> Note: No evidence of whose translation was used for the production.	Srinakarinwirot University
1990	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> Note: Based on the translation by Pansak Sukhee (not published)	Bangkok University
1991	<i>Tam Jai Tan</i> [<i>As You like It</i>]	Based on King Vajiravudh's translation of Shakespeare's <i>As You Like It</i> Staged at Dusit Thanee Hotel.	

		<p>Note: The production was staged as a special theatrical event, conducted by professional theatre practitioners on their special gathering.</p> <p>Directed by Nalinee Seetasuwan</p> <p>All the main characters were played by famous professional television and movie stars.</p>	
1993	<i>Tam Jai Tan</i> [<i>As You like It</i>]	Based on King Vajiravudh's translation of Shakespeare's <i>As You Like It</i>	Chulalongkorn University Production
1994	<i>Fun Khong Juliet</i> [<i>Juliet's Dream</i>]	Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> , Songs adapted from Leonard Bernstein's Musical <i>West Side Story</i>	Thammasat University Directed by Mattani Ratnin
1995 (4-10 May)	<i>Hamlet the Musical</i>	Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> Based on Sarawanee Sukhumwat's translation of Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i>	'28 Theatre Company on the celebrated occasion of the theatre company's 10 th anniversary.
1997	<i>Ratree Nitmit Klang Kimhun</i> [<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>]	Based on Noppamas Veohong's translation of Shakespeare's <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> Note: the production was directed by Linda Hardy, a Theatre professor from the University of Victoria, Canada during her teaching exchange visit at Chulalongkorn University	Chulalongkorn University Production

1997	<i>Venit Vanit</i> [<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>]	Based on King Vajiravudh's translation of Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i>	Khon Kaen University Production Note: the production was directed by Jakkrit Duangpattra (a professional theatre practitioner who was also a professor of the Thai Language and Thai Literature Department, Khon Kaen University)
2004 (13-14 Jan)	<i>The Tempest</i>	The contemporary dance adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i> . Staged at the Thailand Cultural Center. This was an international production directed and choreographed by Marcia Haydee and Ismael Ivo and performed by a renowned Thai contemporary dancer in cooperation with the Dance Centre.	International troupe in cooperation with the Thai Dance Centre
2007 (11 Jan - 4 Feb)	<i>Payu Pirote</i> [<i>Raging Storm</i>]	Based on Noppamas Veohong's translation of Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i> (not published) Note: The production was funded by the Thailand Research Fund as the fifth production of the project <i>Rueng Kao Lao Mai</i> [The Legend Retold] – an experimental theatre programme.	Chulalongkorn University Production

2007 (June-Dec)	The 'Shakespeare in Bangkok' Project	<p>The 'Shakespeare in Bangkok' Project</p> <p>Note: This project, funded by the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Ministry of Culture Thailand, aimed to present a wide range of contemporary stage performances and art activities inspired by Shakespeare's plays.</p> <p>The project ran between June – December 2007 and included the stage performances by co-operative theatre troupes listed below:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Shylock Vanit Bangkok</i> [<i>Shylock the Merchant of Bangkok</i>] Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> This is a touring production for performance in many universities in Bangkok. 2. <i>King Lear Yaei Fah Tah Din</i> [<i>King Lear the Dauntless</i>] Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>The Tragedy of King Lear</i> (Performance date: 20 June – 8 July 2007) 3. <i>Mai Pen Rung</i> 	Na Kak Pleuy Theatre Network [Naked Mask Theatre Network]
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		<p>[<i>Nonsense</i>]</p> <p>Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>Twelfth Night</i> (Performance date: July 2007)</p> <p>4. <i>Meu Pom Lab Nai Kuen Patiwat</i></p> <p>[<i>While I was sleeping at the Night of Riot</i>]</p> <p>Adaptation of Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> (Performance date: November - December 2007)</p> <p>5. <i>It's good to be Fool</i></p> <p>Adaptation inspired by Shakespeare's fools (Performance date: November - December 2007)</p>	
2008 (28-30 Nov)	<p><i>Tawa Tossaratree Khuen Nee Mee Rak</i></p> <p>[<i>Twelfth Night: Love is Here Tonight</i>]</p>	The translation was conducted by a group of students from the Amateur Dramatic Group	Amateur Dramatic Group, Faculty of Fine Arts Thammasat University
2009 (4-15 March)	<i>Hamlet: the Techno Drama</i>	A solo performance adapted from Shakespeare's <i>Hamlet</i> Staged at the Crescent Moon Space Theatre	New Theatre Society and Crescent Moon Space
2010 (6-7 Feb)	<i>Hunsa Ratree</i>	Based on Nopamat Veohong's translation of Shakespeare's <i>Twelfth</i>	Chulalongkorn University Production

	[<i>A Merry Night</i>]	<i>Night</i> . Staged at Bangkok Arts and Cultural Centre.	
2011 (2-19 June)	<i>Macbeth</i>	Directed by Nopamat Veohong and based on Nopamat Veohong's translation of Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i> . Staged to celebrate the opening of the Sodsai Panthumkomol Dramatic Arts Centre, Bangkok.	Chulalongkorn University Production

Shakespeare as a major influence on King Vajiravudh's literary works

Shakespeare's style of writing was one of the prominent Western literary role-models to shape King Vajiravudh's rhetorical style. Apart from introducing Western-style theatre to Thai audience through spoken plays, in creating his own literary and theatre productions the King also adopted Shakespeare's writing style and was apparently 'inspired' by some of Shakespeare's works. One of the most obvious examples could be the case of King Vajiravudh's famous verse play *Madanabadha*. *Madanabadha* is the first Thai verse playtext which is different from previous traditional Thai verse plays in the sense that it follows a Western playtext format in which the characters deliver the lines themselves. The King's innovative creation of *Madanabadha* received a hugely positive response from the Thai literary public. It has been regarded today as the King's masterpiece, not only in terms of its literary distinction but also in his endeavours to apply a variety of *chan* verse forms to the writing of a play. *Chan* form is considered the most sophisticated and complicated form of Thai verse requiring a very skillful poet. It is difficult to compose a few stanzas of *Chan*, let alone a whole playtext. As a result, the Royal Institute of Siam, then called the Society of Literature, issued a certificate of commendation of King Vajiravudh's *Madanabadha* as being 'a pioneer work of modern drama; which has been well composed and is only possible of achievement by one with a high degree of ability and wide learning'.¹

From the mega-success of the work, in 1925 King Vajiravudh decided to translate his own work into English to give an opportunity for the play to be accessible internationally. The King's first English translation of *Madanabadha* was done in prose. However, Prince Dhani Nivat – King Vajiravudh's brother and personal consultant on literary subject – was aware of the King's ardent admiration for Shakespeare and Shakespearean blank-verse. He suggested to the King that the value of the *Madanabadha* translation 'would be much enhanced if

¹ Dhani Nivat Kromamum Bidyalabh, Prince, 'King Rama VI's Last Work, The Siamese Theatre', *A Collection of Reprints from Journal of the Siam Society* (Bangkok, 1975), p. 159.

[it was] put it into such a form [i.e. Shakespearean blank verse]’.² The translation of *Madanabadha* was also supplemented by a learned glossary of terms and names. In a personal letter from the King to his brother Prince Dhani Nivat, dated 2 August 1925, King Vajiravudh mentioned his current work in translating *Madanabadha*, which he decided to give an English title *The Romance of a Rose*. His statement clearly shows his intention to adopt Shakespearean blank verse in the translation. The King writes:³

[T]he first act of *Madanabadha* finished. Apart from the lyrical pieces, I have adopted the usual decasyllabic blank verse, as it is best adapted for dialogues. There are occasionally decasyllabic rhymed couplets, and you [Prince Dhani Nivat] will discover, in three places, sonnets sandwiches in between (following the practice adopted by Shakespeare as in ‘Romeo and Juliet’). There are other metres here and there to provide a little variety.⁴

Sadly, the King’s hope of finishing the forth act was never fulfilled for the pressure of state-business prevented further work on the translation; and towards the end of October the King contracted an illness which proved fatal. King Vajiravudh died in the early hours of the 26th of November 1925. In Prince Dhani Nivat’s record, he notes:

[U]pon further search among papers left on the writing-table of His Majesty, a few pages of Act IV of the metrical translation were found. This then was where the ‘Unfinished Symphony,’ if one might be allowed to adopt a musical simile, ended, a touching memorial to its versatile author.⁵

Although King Vajiravudh makes a clear statement in the preface of the book that the plot of *Madanabadha* is entirely original, based upon no myth nor

² Dhani Nivat, p. 159.

³ King Vajiravudh usually wrote personal letters to his brothers in English.

⁴ Dhani Nivat, p. 160.

⁵ Dhani Nivat, p. 163.

tradition, some parts of the story suggest otherwise, suggesting a well-known Hindu myth *Sakuntala* combined with Shakespeare's *Othello*. *Madanabadha* tells a story of a celestial maiden named Madana who is the subject of the unfulfilled love of the celestial lord, Sudeshna. Since Madana does not reciprocate his feelings, in desperation the lord banishes her from the heavens to assume a human form on earth or, indeed, any other that she may choose. Madana asks to be a fragrant flower, new to mundane existence, and she becomes a plant in the forest of the Himalayas known as the *kubjaka*, a rose. Only one day in a month, can Madana assume a human body and only when she falls in love and that love is reciprocated will she become human. King Chayasaen of Hussatinapura encountered Madana on a day on which she was human. They fell in love and Chayasaen marries her and takes her to his palace. Janti, Chayasaen's queen, is furious to know about her husband's new wife. She therefore sets up a plan to deceive Chayasaen into the belief that Madana is having an affair with his best friend Supang. Chayasaen then orders an execution of the two. However, the executioner feels sympathy for them, so he secretly frees Madana and Supang. Devastated by the unfair judgment of her husband, Madana goes back to the forest and seeks help from her lord Sudeshna asking him to restore Chayasaen's passion to her. But instead of granting her request, disappointed Sudeshna turns her back to be the *kubjaka*, a rose with the curse that she will never return to being human again. When Chayasaen learns the truth that Madana and Supang are innocent, he then banishes his evil queen from the palace and goes to seek for Madana in the forest in the hope of bringing her back to the palace. But he is too late as Madana has now turned to be a rose. In the end, Chayasaen sadly brings the rose back to the palace and grows it there. The rose thereafter becomes the symbol of beauty and of the sadness of true love.

The plot, particularly towards the ending of the story, shows a hint of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Madana, as Shakespeare's Desdemona, is accused of having committed adultery with her husband's best friend and subordinate. But instead of being killed because of rage and jealousy of her husband, she is banished. It is very unusual to Thai traditional dramatic convention that the story ends without the reconciliation and reunion of the main characters. The King,

however, chooses not to kill the main characters as in Shakespeare's *Othello* because it would be unacceptable and unorthodox to kill a hero and heroine who are obviously 'good' people. Also, in terms of staging the play, it is a taboo to display a main character's death scene on stage. In Thai dramatic convention, it is believed to bring bad luck to the theatre troupe.

The play has been often staged since the King's death in 1925; most productions choose to stage some parts of the play especially the forest love scene of the hero and heroine. Another scene which is no less popularly staged, and of which the dialogue is well-remembered, is the scene when Madana is brought to Sudeshna, the celestial lord who falls desperately in love with her. By using magical power, Sudeshna hopes to win her love. Although magic is able to compel her to say or do anything, it is unable to influence her spirit which remains dormant. She is therefore never in a position even in a trance to say that she loves him. Much to Sudeshna's dissatisfaction, Madana is then restored from such a condition, only to assert her own conviction that she never can reciprocate his love. The following part is the excerpt from the King's English translation of the scene. It proves that King Vajiravudh truly attempted to translate his work into Shakespearean English, imitating Shakespearean rhetorical style and format.

Sudeshna: Ah! Ravishing beloved Madanā, divinely fair,

I love and I adore thee with devotion great and rare.

Tell me, sweet maid, thou art willing to love me back also.

Madana: I'd not oppose Your Grace at all, whether willing or no.

Sudeshna: Are they all true, fair Madanā, the words spoken to me?

Madana: I'll speak such words, O gracious god, as are pleasing to thee.

Sudeshna: Why not tell me if thou lov'st me truly or not, my treasure?

Madana: Should I love thee truly or not, my lord? What is thy pleasure?

Sudeshna: I love and hope to have thy love, and I'll never forsake thee.

Madana: Loving and hoping as thou dost, why shouldst thou e'er forsake me?

Sudeshna: Love made my heart-weary, since I could not dally with thee.

Madana: Could thy heart-weariness by dalliance allayed be?

Sudeshna: Oh, Madanā, why wilt thou not give me an answer fair?

Madana: Oh! Why art thou not fair to Madanā, great deity rare?

Sudeshna: Hopeless Sudeshna loves sweet Madanā, untouch'd by love!

Madana: Untouch'd by love am I, to love me would quite hopeless prove!

Sudeshna: So ravishing in shape, but why, Oh! Why hast such a hard heart?

Madana: Though ravishing in shape, I'm weak, so my heart plays a hard part!

Sudeshna: If I embrace and kiss thee now, what wouldst thou say, my dear?

Madana: I could not say thee nay if so be thy desire, that's clear.

Sudeshna: But wouldst thou be willing, my love, to let me clasp and kiss?

Madana: Willing or no, I must in my manners ne'er be remiss⁶

⁶ Pin Malakula, *Introduction to the Dramatic Activities of His Majesty King Vajiravudh*, Thai Texts, p. 345.